

# cineACTION

ISSUE 91 2013

Art  
+  
Film

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## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

### CINEACTION ISSUE 92

#### POLITICS AND CINEMA

This issue welcomes submissions on the relationship between politics and cinema, featuring discussions of particular films, filmmakers, genres, different national cinemas and different historical periods. Politics and cinema was a foundational focus for film studies, from the theoretical/political manifesto of "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" by *Cahiers du Cinema*, almost 50 years ago. All films are political, we learned. That focus has shifted and diversified through many permutations and trends over the intervening decades but still can illuminate both politics and cinema. Political and ideological critique of Hollywood remains important: as we watch the remake of *Red Dawn* or another *Die Hard*, is Reaganite cinema, so memorably dissected by Andrew Britton, returning? Did it ever go away? Or consider the 'Washington' films, *Argo*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Lincoln* with their intimate connections to the American state and party politics. Obamite cinema? Robin Wood sharply categorized Hollywood's Dominant Tendencies in the first issue of *CineAction*—what are the dominant tendencies of contemporary Global Hollywood? And what of the representational politics of gender, race and—the usually neglected—class? What is the state of politically motivated, militant cinema now? Discussions beyond Hollywood to international cinema, to documentary, to experimental cinema and beyond cinema to games, the internet and transmedia are particularly welcome. Book reviews too.

#### CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION

Part of the issue will be devoted to Canadian film and television: historical and critical analysis, reviews of recent films, book reviews.

Papers submitted in hard copy to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, 4700 Keele St. Toronto ON, Canada M3J 1P3. If accepted, a file will be requested. Queries to sforsyth@yorku.ca. Guidelines for contributors are available at [www.cineaction.ca](http://www.cineaction.ca).

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE SEPT. 30, 2013**

### CINEACTION ISSUE 93

#### THE CITY AND FILM

Film and urban theorists have noted the relationship between the development of the modern metropolis and the rise of the cinema, which remains a central component of modern urban culture. This issue will explore the continuing connection between the two and how it's expressed and continues to be relevant. The cinema has shaped ideas about reality and in turn, has influenced how certain cities are perceived producing a dynamic relationship between the social world and culture. Submissions can include the reading of a film dealing with a specific city such as New York or Paris or the city and genre films, the city as utopia or as nightmare, the destroyed city.

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE FEBRUARY 1, 2014**

**FRONT COVER IMAGE:** *Continuity*  
**BACK COVER IMAGE:** *Zero Dark Thirty*

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# Art + Film

The idea for an issue of *Cineaction* focusing on the intersection of Art and Film came to me as I was reflecting on two shows I saw in the Fall of 2012 at the Power Plant, Toronto's public gallery for contemporary art. The first was Christian Marclay's wildly popular virtuoso 24 hour cinecollage "The Clock" (2010); the second, "Continuous Coverage", consisted of 3 projects—"CNN Concatenated" (2002), "Five Thousand Feet is the Best" (2011), and "Continuity" (2012)—by Omer Fast, an Israeli-born, American-raised artist. Here were two artists working with film in the production of works that could not be categorized as film—works intended for the art gallery rather than the movie theatre which presented challenges to the spectators' act of viewing; indeed, to their understanding of temporal, structural and narrative conventions of film.

Rather than keeping the theme narrow (Artists-who-use-film-to-make-art), I decided to expand it to include all possibilities inherent in the combination of the two terms 'Art' and 'Film'. This issue is the serendipitous result of the initial Call for Papers; the individual articles assembled to present a broad spectrum of approaches and interests.

The first two do in fact deal with the originating idea: Edward Bacal's analysis of the work of artists Sharon Lockhart and Steve McQueen contextualized within avant garde cinema; and Maria San Filippo's observations on film installations by artists Yang Fudong and Omer Fast. Next is a piece by Michael Boughn who offers a fresh perspective on the controversial and much-discussed film *Zero Dark Thirty* by inserting it into the context of what he calls America's 'War on Art'. Art in Film, in the form of painted portraits of women in Film Noir, is the subject of Steven Jacobs and Lisa Colpaert's 'Framing Death and Desire'. Victoria L. Evans' piece on Douglas Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* takes a highly original approach to this film by situating Sirk and his classic 50s melodrama within the framework of Theosophy and the abstract expressionist artist Kandinsky's theory of art. Another unusual relationship is presented in Vito Adriaenssens' paper 'From Hephaistos to the Silver Screen', which looks at the genesis of 'living sculptures' in ancient greek mythology and art in order to position the cinema's animated beings—humanoid and otherwise—in a direct hereditary lineage. Kalani Michell's article "I know it when I see it" takes as its starting point the work of German artist Timm Ulrichs who uses film stills sourced from porn films and reproduced in magazines, which he crops in such a way as to both semi-abstract the 'action' and place emphasis on a canonical artwork that just happens to be included in the scene. To round off the issue, there is Allan MacInnis's interview with the two directors of *Leviathan*, and two reviews of recent film festivals, Alice Shih on TIFF's "A Century of Chinese Cinema", and Alison Frank on Fribourg's Festival of International Film.

—Susan Morrison



# Sharon Lockhart and Steve McQueen

## INSIDE THE FRAME OF STRUCTURAL FILM

By EDWARD BACAL

Forty years since its heyday, the legacy of structural film remains visible in the work of contemporary artists and filmmakers Sharon Lockhart and Steve McQueen. Given the rich set of aesthetic terms this avant-garde film movement has provided, these artist/filmmakers demonstrate renewed iterations of structural film's formal investigations into the ontology of the filmic medium—the kind initially exemplified by landmark works like Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970). Beyond echoing the movement's late-modernist experiments with the specificity of the filmic image and the viewer's conscious perception of it, Lockhart and McQueen place new critical attention on what forms these initial preoccupations have generated. Hence, we find them borrowing structural film's static shots, long takes, and self-reflexive camera movements in order to re-imagine films like *Wavelength* and *Serene Velocity*; in doing so, they renegotiate the relation between these formal strategies and narrative and content—two of structural film's main objects of contention. Furthermore, in redefining what these filmic forms can do, Lockhart and McQueen unearth an affective political dimension that rests latent in structural film's formal austerity. With works such as Lockhart's *Lunch Break* (2008), a portrait of contemporary American labour within the intimate interiors of a Maine shipyard, and McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), which recounts IRA martyr Bobby Sands' 1981 prison hunger strike, the political potential of the structural-filmic image finds rich expression. In touching upon these figures and



Empire





these works, I hereby aim to uncover what they may tell us about the relation between the formal and critical functions of the structural-filmic image in its renewed guise.

### Structural Film, Condensed

Looking back to the avant-garde film culture centred in and around New York during the late 1960s and early 1970s, we find structural film emerging from an interest in the material and perceptual properties of film in and of itself. Like contemporaneous developments in art (namely minimalism), an overarching emphasis on the intrinsic properties of a medium's given form, combined with a newfound investment in the phenomenological conditions such properties entail, underlie the discourse of structural film. Just as minimalist sculptors created works that reflect how sculptural forms exist objectively in space and time, experimental filmmakers created works that address film's specific function in the spatio-temporal field it shares with its viewers. From the material properties of celluloid and light through to the experiential conditions intrinsic to the film-viewing experience, the formal and perceptual nature of cinema figures as structural film's subject and object alike. In turn, the substance of a given film becomes synonymous with its *structure*: the internal "shape" of the image and the underlying filmmaking processes that determine it. Thus, by foregrounding and communicating its own formal structure in tandem with the viewing experience that structure engenders, and by exploring the ontology and phenomenology of the filmic medium together, structural film sought to reflect, *through* film, the viewer's conscious experience of film.

Formally, we can loosely identify structural film's diverse practitioners (including, most prominently, Snow, Gehr, Hollis

Frampton, Paul Sharits, George Landow, Jonas Mekas, Joyce Wieland, George Maciunas, Peter Kubelka, and others) according to the four criteria outlined by the movement's chief theoretician, P. Adams Sitney. According to Sitney, the use of a fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen set the terms for categorizing structural film;<sup>1</sup> such traits, however, are rarely seen together, nor do they exhaust what may operate as a structural film. What unites these tendencies, then, is the overarching way that with these techniques "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified," Sitney writes, for "it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film."<sup>2</sup> In other words, as R. Bruce Elder notes, "a structural film is a film whose outline form either is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting and editing."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the film's shape becomes a central determining factor in its function, such that form is brought to a point of self-reflexivity at which the film's internal structure is revealed. Meanwhile, content is minimal to the extent that it remains subsidiary to this structural outline.<sup>4</sup> Viewing a structural film hence becomes an act of perceptive apprehension: divorced from symbolic or narrative content, "the pleasure we take in watching a structural film depends in part on discovering the preconceived schema that determines the variations in the film."<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, structural film embodies a marked turn from the precedent tradition in American avant-garde cinema (that of filmmakers like Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage, who in their own ways were concerned with evoking subjective psychological states<sup>6</sup>) in that it moves away from the representation of subjective phenomena to the presentation of the objective



image. For example, this distinction is best exemplified by the foremost proto-structural filmmaker, Andy Warhol, whose *Sleep* (1963), quite simply a five and a half hour film of a man sleeping, satirically shifts the camera's focus from the representation of interior dream-states to the exterior reality of the dreamer (and further, we can claim, to the real conscious mind of the viewer). No less, by self-consciously distending duration while emptying the image of content—thereby challenging the viewer's ability to pay attention throughout—films like *Sleep* or *Empire* (1964), an eight hour long static shot of the Empire State building, call to the fore both the nature of the film and the corresponding act of viewing it: in apprehending the film in and of itself—that is, a film which refuses to represent anything other than itself, whether through metaphor or symbolic editing—the viewer becomes conscious of herself viewing it (especially when it is as deliberately boring as *Empire*). In turn, Warhol began to uncover the intrinsic elements of film-qua-film, such that he, having set out to blatantly parody avant-garde film conventions, inadvertently laid much of the foundation for structural film's analytic experiments.

If, as Sitney thus notes, structural film “is an attempt to answer Warhol's attack by converting his tactics into the tropes of the response,”<sup>7</sup> Michael Snow's *Wavelength* presents perhaps the strongest reply. In short, *Wavelength* consists of a fixed camera that, over forty-five minutes, zooms-in through the space of a loft toward a photograph of the ocean placed on the wall (additionally, various on- and off-screen activity, periodical flares of light, and a sine tone whose pitch elevates in *glissando* also feature). Given Snow's intention to “make a definitive statement of pure Film space and time,”<sup>8</sup> *Wavelength* articulates its filmic structure by way of a meditation on consciousness—that is, on the self-aware perception of oneself situated in real space and time. As time progresses and the camera's constant zoom shrinks the field of vision (i.e. as it pushes the physical space of the loft and the activity within it out of the frame) the film projects the viewer through the immediate interior setting into the limitless intra-pictorial space of the photograph/ocean—the filmic image beyond the filmic image. Here, as the image's position within filmic space shifts, we experience this transition as a spatio-temporally situated movement of consciousness, or what Annette Michelson identifies via Edmund Husserl as a change in our “horizon of expectation.”<sup>9</sup> This is to say, *Wavelength* forwards a phenomenology of conscious experience by offering the viewer an awareness of her present situation within a temporal horizon that spans from memory to anticipation (from that which we can no longer see to that which we are heading towards). Meanwhile, in moving from one illusory space to another (from the cinematic image to the smaller yet infinitely larger image of the photograph/ocean) the viewer is transported through the visual space of the screen to the conceptual space of the mind. In other words, as the photograph/ocean overtakes the space of the loft from the inside-out, it comes to serve as *Wavelength*'s ultimate pictorial space, bringing the film to its “metaphysical culmination” at which it breaks through the photograph's surface.<sup>10</sup> Thus, through what Snow calls a “balancing of ‘illusion’ and ‘fact,’”<sup>11</sup> *Wavelength* surveys the structures of cinematic space and time through a gesture that self-consciously extends beyond the image, taking residence in the viewer's perception of the quasi-transcendental zoom. As such, the film adopts the processes of consciousness and its projection through time and space as its subject and object, presenting the cognitive apprehension of the film as both its form and content.

hension of the film as both its form and content.

Similarly, Gehr's *Serene Velocity* plays on the gradual movement of the camera's perspective over time, but as processed through a visceral fluttering of the image. Throughout its twenty-three minutes, *Serene Velocity* depicts a single institutional hallway that appears from rapidly alternating standpoints. By adjusting the depth of the camera's zoom in inversely proportionate and increasingly distant measures, Gehr presents the hallway fluctuating between views of increasing nearness and farness, the discrepancy of which shifts from being imperceptible to strongly polarized. Meanwhile, by affording each shot only four frames (which equates to a quarter of a second in time) the film assumes a stroboscopic intensity that is alternately meditative and violent. Like *Wavelength*, *Serene Velocity* articulates filmic space vis-à-vis the passage of time, setting the limits of the frame in accordance with its processual motion (i.e. we experience the passage of time in relation to our perception of filmic space). As such, the film reflects its inbuilt shape, asserting its systematic organization of perspectives which, in effect, create a composition that is grid-like both graphically (given the hallway's significant appearance as a seemingly endless set of serially repeated squares) and temporally.<sup>12</sup> Hence, as Elder describes: “*Serene Velocity* uses a deductive structure that arises from the edges of the frame being reflected again and again in an architectural form that includes the perspectival repetition of that form through depth... Thus, the shape of the film is ‘implied’ in the corridor's structure: there is a deductive relation between the depicted form in the image and the literal shape of the film.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the film functions like two opposed mirrors that serially echo the frame of both the hallway and the image, evoking the grid-like figure that Gehr aligns with the film's mathematically ordered temporal structure. The overlapping matrices of these temporal and perspectival frames are, in other words, analogous in their ordering of filmic space and time, together working to construct and assert the film's intrinsic structure.

#### Frames and Factories: Sharon Lockhart<sup>14</sup>

Fast-forwarding some decades, the work of Los Angeles-based artist Sharon Lockhart represents a close and sustained engagement with the aesthetics of structural film. In short, her film-based practice began in the late 1990s, growing out of her work in photography. In both media (and certainly, her projects regularly use both in conjunction) Lockhart focusses a critical gaze upon the aesthetics and functions of anthropological images and of documented performance, therein examining the ways such imagery frames its subjects. For example, her photographic series have included images of museum workers situated within their respective settings (i.e. “framed” within the museum) and portraits of various families in rural Brazil (each family being allowed to not only arrange themselves as they please, but, after referencing an accompanying polaroid, to further revise their arrangement and poses for subsequent takes). These projects reveal Lockhart's overarching interest in the relation between photo-based documentation and its subjects; meanwhile, by drawing on the anthropological agency of the image—that is, the image's capacity to not only document extant social relations but to engender new ones between the photograph, photographer, and photographed—she plays with the conventions by which such “objective” images function. As such, Lockhart confronts the ways individuals appear—if not perform—for the camera as social subjects, thereby questioning the established anthropological gaze by which such documen-





Goshogaoka



Lunch Break





Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon

tation retrospectively fashions subjectivities. It is in this sense that her images of Brazilian families, for example, renegotiate these power-relations between photographer, photographed, and photograph by affording the families a measure of self-determination that aims to re-situate anthropological knowledge in dialogical terms.

Following this logic, Lockhart's work in film moves from the self-consciously "straight" photography of anthropological convention to an analogously straight cinema that finds its influence in structural film as much as in the minimalist dance of Yvonne Rainer and the anthropological *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch.<sup>15</sup> For instance, consider *Goshogaoka* (1997), a film composed of six ten-minute segments in which the camera, which throughout remains fixed in the centre of a high school gymnasium, looks upon a Japanese girls basketball team doing warm-up drills. Given the simplicity of the camera's extended stillness, the film finds its power in the serialized repetition of sounds and body movements it witnesses, which respectively coalesce into arrangements that come to resemble the music of minimalist composers like Philip Glass and the experimental dance of Rainer. But beyond simply documenting this phenomena (which is fascinating to observe as something equally alien and mundane) the film posits an all the more interesting reflection on the (unacknowledged) presence of not only the camera in the gym, but also the *frame* in the film itself: before the team periodically returns to the middle of the court and sets into an ordered grid that, placed directly in the camera's line of sight, invokes the rationalizing and "objective" vision of linear perspective, the girls run around the gym in alternate exercises that span the entire floor. As individuals run from side to side,

distant bodies move through the length of the frame while close-up torsos momentarily flash across it, such that the film alternates between the direct sight of a surveying gaze and the relatively chaotic movement that occurs in, out, and around its liminal limits of sight.<sup>16</sup> In passing through the camera's field of vision the girls articulate the film's finite pictorial space, invoking the constitutive outside that the frame (indeed, that *any* frame) necessarily excludes in order to function *as* a frame. In turn, the film gestures toward the conceptual space beyond the frame, which is made accessible to us only by the sounds that, transferring between the on- and off- screen, imply that this imaginary space does exist and is contiguous with the film's pictorial space. In this capacity, Lockhart's debt to structural film is evident in her tracing of the filmic frame vis-à-vis the borders it draws between the real/visible and the virtual/imaginary of filmic space. Whether focussing on a certain set of cultural rituals or the hypnotic aesthetic they produce, her films consider the cinematic dimension of a kind of anthropological imagination—one produced by what is, as much as what is not, in frame.

While this impulse runs through Lockhart's oeuvre, it finds its sharpest expression in her engagement with images of labour. Evident in photographic series like *Lunch Break Installation...* (2003),<sup>17</sup> which concentrates on the typically unseen labour activity that permeates museums, Lockhart extends her project of framing to the worker subjectivities that escape the field of vision. Depicting workers installing a Duane Hanson installation at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, these images represent, on one hand, the institutional frames that contain cultural and artistic value and, on the other, the coterminous architectural frames wherein the labour that underlies these



sites of cultural production remains obscure. Thus, as art handlers camouflage into Duane Hanson's hyper-realistic tableau of construction workers, *Lunch Break Installation* overlays the representation and reality of everyday physical work so as to expose the differential value of art and labour within the gallery. Indeed, as viewers inevitably do double- or triple- takes in order to distinguish which figures are real, an implicit distinction is made between whose work is art and whose is relatively menial. In thereby self-consciously reframing these scenes, these images acknowledge that within the museum's walls the labour of skilled workers becomes abstract, failing to earn the cultural valuation or visibility that is afforded to the auratic objects their own work often resembles.

To this end, Lockhart echoes previous generations of institutional critique artists who have explored the relation between the physical architectures of institutions and their social function as cultural frames. Where she comes into her own, however, is where she translates her interest in labour into the terms of structural film, imbuing the latter movement's formalist rigour with a marked conceptual ethos. Indeed, her 2008 film *Lunch Break*, which carries over this eponymous theme, represents her most ambitious and inventive project yet. Here, Lockhart breaks with her use of static cameras for the first time, instead channelling *Wavelength* in her movement of the camera and *Serene Velocity* in her shaping of the image. Comprising a single ten and a half minute shot, slowed down to a snail's pace at eighty-three minutes, the film gradually moves the camera down a seemingly endless corridor within the Bath Iron Works shipyard in Maine. Filmed during the shipyard's daily lunch break, Lockhart captures a brief moment of respite within the work day and distends it to boundless lengths ("boundless" insofar as viewers are not likely to witness the space and endure the time of the film in whole). Like Warhol (who similarly slowed down his films' projection rates in order to exaggerate their length), Lockhart trains her camera on the utterly mundane and stretches it out to vast expanses; like Snow, she introduces into the viewing experience a temporal horizon of memory and expectation vis-à-vis the movement of the image; and like Gehr, she employs the given space of the hallway in order to articulate the structural space of the film's frame. From here, *Lunch Break* exploits its sluggish movement and abiding duration in order to make the time and space it concentrates within the frame palpable to the viewer. Thus, as the camera moves through the corridor and as details otherwise only glimpsed command assiduous scrutiny, the film asks the viewer to invest considerable perceptual attention into a scene of typically overlooked spaces. Moreover, given the visceral intensity of its duration, *Lunch Break* amplifies the content of the image, accentuating not only its movement through the corridor but also the social space contained therein.

To be sure, both the physical and social space of the factory, and no less the *time* of the factory, have played an ambivalent role throughout the history of cinema. Dating back to arguably the first ur-structural film, the Lumière Brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895), the trope of workers leaving factories has reverberated throughout the history of cinema. As Harun Farocki has analysed, cinema since the Lumière's' original film has consistently represented the figure of the worker leaving the factory. Consequently, the inner spaces of labour often remain obscured by the outer space of leisure where, Farocki indicates, the life of the individual seems to begin.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the factory-as-frame serves to delineate the

visibility of the spaces and subjects of industrial production, abstracting not only the labour but also the subjectivity of the modern worker that the factory produces. In entering the factory, then, *Lunch Break* addresses this ambivalent visibility; at the same time, it also aims to circumvent the abstraction of workers' subjectivities either by dismissing their work or by reducing them to it, as if they were simply faceless appendages of the factory. Indeed, we do not see any work done, but this is not to alienate these subjects from their labour; instead, *Lunch Break* focusses on the interstice between labour and leisure, finding in the lunch break the small scale cultural rituals that comprise the community of workers who share them. In this sense, it is entirely significant that the film comprises only part of a larger, year-long project that keeps with Lockhart's anthropological impulse. Taking care to not simply document or fetishize the figure of the worker from afar, she spent a year interacting with electricians, welders, pipe fitters, machinists, tinsmiths, and insulators at Bath Iron Works in order to earn their trust. Out of her quasi-field research she produced the aforementioned film, photographs from around the shipyard (e.g. images of snack tables or union posters, as well as portraits of workers and still-lives of lunch boxes), and, perhaps most remarkably, *The Lunch Break Times*, a freely circulated newspaper edited by Lockhart containing germane texts from shipyard workers and art world figures alike. And of course she also produced *Exit* (2008), a separate forty-one minute film that depicts, yes, workers leaving the shipyard over the span of a week.<sup>19</sup>

Proving Lockhart's awareness of the established conventions and pitfalls that attend the depiction of industrial workers and their environs, *Lunch Break* finds in its namesake quotidian ritual the substance of a certain kind of experience that is otherwise lost in available frames of representation. Accordingly, the language of structural film assists Lockhart in foregrounding a critical self-reflexivity of the image, but without allowing the film's structure to marginalize the content of its subject matter: unlike *Serene Velocity*, for instance, where the depth of the hallway is mirrored in the formal repetition of the hall's shape, *Lunch Break*'s employees do not mirror any pre-given internal form; rather, they draw attention to the space between the inside and outside of the film's frame as they, like the girls in *Goshogaoka*, move through it. Nor, on the other hand, does Lockhart allow the film's conceptual content to foreclose the sensory presence of the filmic image: by intensifying the experience of duration and by radically sharpening our perceptive focus of the corridor, she animates the space-time configuration of the shipyard, articulating the phenomenological experience it yields so that it may affect the viewer. In this capacity, Lockhart's politics of the structural-filmic image emerge as more than just representation, but as a deeper invocation of the space-time frame of the factory. To be certain, the phenomenological experience of the workplace is entirely significant in light of the context of the rationalized ordering of space and time ushered in with the industrial revolution. As a paradigm of modern capitalism, the invention of the nine-to-five, five-day work week, and henceforth the social division of life and work across temporal terms (not to mention the spatial organization of the factory and urban space alike), reflects a pervasive perceptual experience of modernity.<sup>20</sup> In this broad respect, *Lunch Break*'s impact grows to the extent that the sensation of duration and the amplified sense of space that the film engenders works to unsettle this social division of time and space. Our experience of the film, in other words, is not organized by the established schema in



which the lunch break comprises an hour or so of leisure within the work day, or in which this corridor serves a strictly functional purpose in accordance with industrial production imperatives; rather, our experience falls to the side of *filmic* time and space, through which Lockhart wrests the scene of the factory from its typical capitalist instrumentalization so as to rearticulate it in different terms. By extending this brief interval that interrupts the day and by exaggerating the corridor's spatial immediacy, she places the viewer amid a rendering of time and space that does not conform to its given conventions—i.e. the given spatio-temporal frames through which it is typically perceived—and henceforth foregrounds the ground-level social relations, activities, and worker subjectivities that arise from the cultural milieu of Bath Iron Works. Therein, Lockhart explores the culture of the lunch break as more than a social ritual but also an experience that demands new forms of attention and depiction.

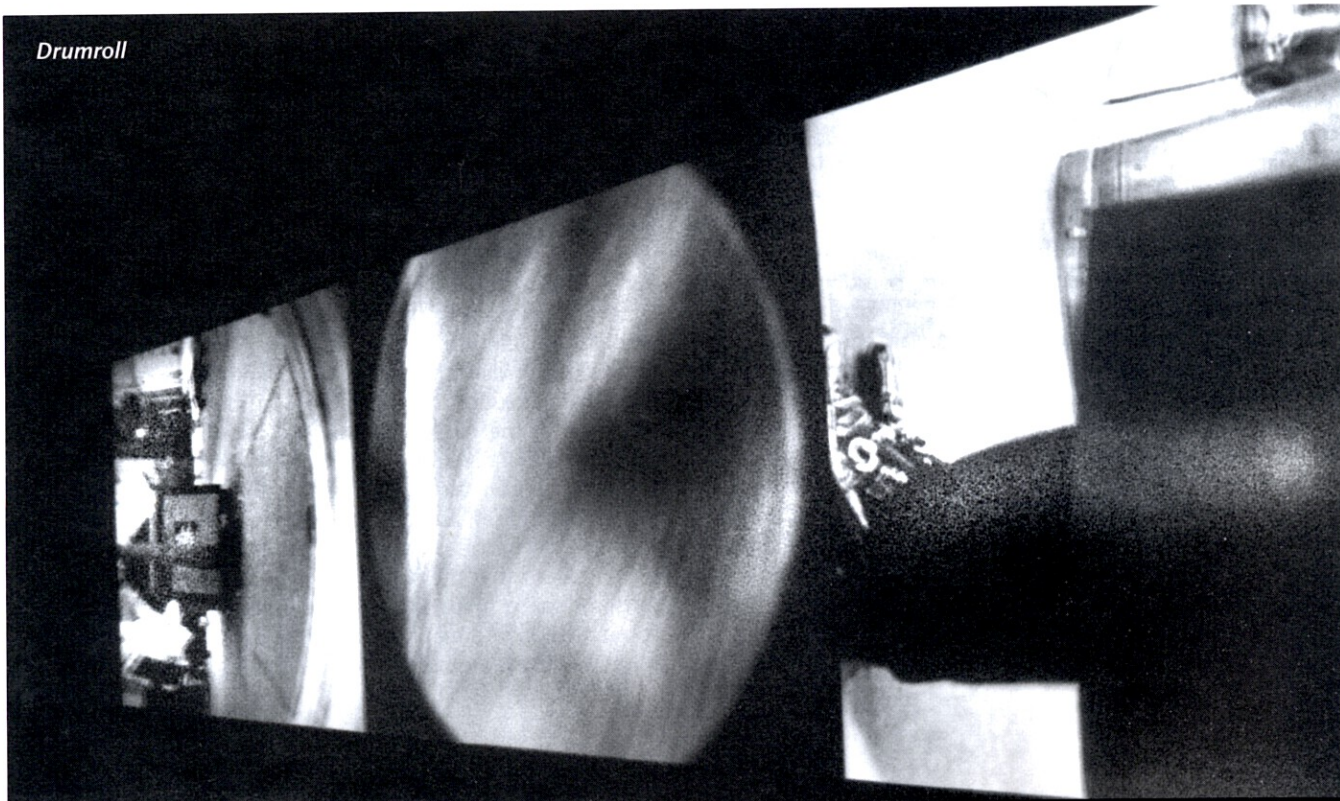
### Cameras and Corporeality: Steve McQueen

Like Lockhart, London-born, Amsterdam-based artist and commercial filmmaker Steve McQueen has regularly invoked structural film in his engagement with cinema. Ranging from his initial non-narrative video installations to his recent turn to conventional feature-length film, McQueen's work emerges from a pointed interest in formal experimentation with the camera and filmic image alike.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, his body of early work from the 1990s consists of short films that experiment with the possibilities of what one can do with the camera. For example, *Catch* (1997) features McQueen tossing a camera back and forth with his sister as it rolls. Between catching the camera and briefly turning it toward one another, the McQueens disrupt the fundamental stability of the image by dissociating it from a subjective point of identification. This is to say, as the image is thrown into an illegible blur, the film's point of view shifts from the holder of the camera to the camera itself, such that McQueen, Michael Newman writes, "recalls, in his decentering of the camera from any possible subject position... early film,

before the camera assumed its identity with the point of view of subjective consciousness..."<sup>22</sup> But rather than simply invoking early cinema, this exercise in the transferability of the image's perspective points toward a more incisive and effectively structural look at how the image materializes as the product of its apparatus. For instance, consider *Drumroll* (1998), wherein McQueen attaches three cameras to the side of a barrel, each of which films as he rolls it down a New York sidewalk (the respective footage is then shown in a row of three projections). Like *Catch*, this film manifests the impression of its pre-established shape, divorcing the image from any kind of imaginary perspective so as to collapse the image with the physical movement of the camera itself. In doing so, McQueen avers the indexical relation between the film's frame and the tangible reality of the camera, experimenting with the latter so as to set the limits of the former. In this sense, his earlier film, *Just Above My Head* (1996), similarly sees McQueen following the path of a moving dolly, on which a camera pointing up toward him is attached. As the artist's head varyingly appears upon the background image of the sky, bobbing in and out of frame as he tries to keep pace, the film echoes Lockhart's emphasis on the liminality of the frame's limits, inasmuch as the film's shape (a fixed camera aimed upwards and moving forward) asserts itself as the figure appears and disappears from the image's ground. Once again, movement through the frame articulates its presence in the film, such that McQueen reveals the frame, in relation to the movement of the camera through space and over time, as constitutive of the filmic image.

Accordingly, McQueen's films appear deceptively simple, if only because his work finds its effect less in formalist exercises *per se* so much as in the affective dimensions they create.<sup>23</sup> To the extent that structural film foregrounds the viewer's experience in space and time, McQueen recognizes that such reflections on the medium's shape present the opportunity to mobilize the sensory power of the filmic image. Beyond the relatively simple formal experiments and visual puns that characterize

*Drumroll*







the aforementioned films, his works exploit the affective material dimensions of cinema in ways not fully explored in structural film proper. In turn, his work extends well beyond its analytic dimensions, manifesting a cinema that is very much felt as an embodied experience. For these reasons, installation plays a vital role in McQueen's work, for it enables his films to communicate with viewers while, recalling Sitney, keeping content minimal in relation to the presence of the film's structure. As such, McQueen exerts exacting control over the conditions of his art's display, ensuring that the perceptual environment in which his films are situated remains sufficiently appropriate to establish the viewer as an embodied subject rather than a "pure look," as Michael Newman notes.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, McQueen has himself noted that "I want to put people into a situation where they are sensitive to themselves watching the piece,"<sup>25</sup> and to that end configures the space of projection so that an affective space opens between the image and viewer in which the form of the image actively corresponds with the embodied perception of it. Hence, McQueen projects his films in separate darkened rooms wherein the image fully covers the wall and where the floor is made of a polished black tile that sharply reflects the screen. For instance, this is the case in *Deadpan* (1999), a four and half minute silent film in which McQueen recreates the Buster Keaton gag where, as the façade of a house topples over, Keaton absent-mindedly stands within the trajectory of its open window. Repeating this scene numerous times from different angles that range from long shots to close ups of McQueen's boots, the artist never flinches, standing immobile with an appropriately deadpan look that changes neither before nor after the action occurs. Thereby departing from Keaton's startled physical comedy, McQueen embraces the scene as "one of the wonderful things one can do with film; one can take a silly idea and give it compelling, powerful, emotional resonance."<sup>26</sup> And certainly, as the scene is serially repeated and we systematically experience it from changing perspectives, the film

becomes deeply affecting in its simplicity. For the viewer standing in this silent and dark room, the presence of this stoic figure onscreen, unflinching amid an endless cycle of anticipation and narrow avoidance of catastrophe, is oddly moving.

To this end, the unfolding of the film's structure—the serial repetition and variation of the same action, but also the cyclical re-staging of this moment of affective impact—serves as the vehicle by which the film's form affects the viewer without recourse to narrative or content. Indeed, McQueen's work in general takes on a quasi-abstract quality in which the minimal (or at least indirect) presence of representational content drives the experience of film in its full force. As such, the aforementioned films remain consistent with structural film's late-modernist ethos, in which the self-conscious use and experience of the medium foregrounds the work's objective properties over subjective content or narration. To be certain, it is this absence of narrative in favour of a more self-conscious, embodied, and affective experience of film that McQueen wields so well: by amplifying the direct spatial and temporal experience of cinema he not only suspends narrative, but in doing so furthers the phenomenological terms of filmic experience. Hence, just as McQueen's emphasis on installation accentuates both the physical and pictorial space of his films, his internal structuring of these elements forwards a temporality that, like *Lunch Break*, frees viewer's from conventional determinations of experience. Indeed, as TJ Demos explains in a discussion of *Just Above My Head*: "With film, the interval [of exposure times] multiplies through the succession of frames, offering extended periods of duration. McQueen's *Just Above My Head* captures exactly this sense of time by fixing on the drawn out passage of a single shot of a figure walking down the street; in the film, protracted duration replaces narrative development. The monotonous simplicity of the activity emphasizes the interval as a prolonged extension of time..."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, when this interval "no longer logically connects before and after, organizing it into



narrative continuity and temporal chronology, film unlocks a new sense of time experienced as an open ended possibility, one that escapes from the slavishness of the movement-image, from its sequential actions, from the inexorable progression of plot lines."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, just as Lockhart offers the intensity of prolonged duration in order to open our perceptual attention to alternate experiences of time and space, McQueen undoes the conventional temporal linearity of filmic experience. And as Jean Fisher similarly writes (here in reference to 2002's *Western Deep* and *Caribs' Leap*, albeit in a description equally fitting of both McQueen and Lockhart's work in general): "McQueen's play with space-time elucidates the fundamental processes at work in our non-rational relation to art: an encounter with an event; dropping out of everyday time into duration in which the play between image and memory generates new associations; transformations of our perceptions of reality."<sup>29</sup> Hence: "Through the combination and relay of affects, the film seduces us into a forgetting of time—of the chronological time of everyday and its extant knowledges, expectations, assumptions—and surrenders us to the immobilised time of duration."<sup>30</sup> Within this immobilized time of duration, then, the intensity of distilled time, and no less our physical experience of it, becomes McQueen's conduit for expression.

While these strategies are by no means exceptional in video installations and avant-garde film, they are in the context of narrative cinema, including McQueen's astounding debut feature, *Hunger*. In short, *Hunger* presents a loosely organized yet acutely precise depiction of the Irish HM Prison Maze in 1981—a time at which republican-loyalist tensions were at a fever pitch and at which this prison housed numerous IRA members, including Bobby Sands, who famously led a series of hunger strikes there. Against the Thatcher government's refusal to grant IRA members the status of political prisoners (as opposed to common criminals), the inmates spend the film routinely protesting in the meagre yet extreme means available: coating the insides of their cells with excrement; collectively pooling urine into the main hallway; abstaining from bathing, wearing prison clothes, and cutting their hair; and finally, Sands' hunger strike (which does not actually commence until the final fifth of the film; in fact, Sands does not appear until half an hour into the film's ninety minutes). Meanwhile, the film follows inmates and guards alike as they endure life in the prison (save for one guard whose domestic life features in several sequences), therein witnessing beatings, riots, forced cutting of hair and beards, family visits to inmates, and the quotidian alienation of cell life. Thus, while the film is about Sands it also has no true protagonist, for we experience the prison from the various perspectives, events, and environments McQueen depicts. As such, *Hunger* stands at a far cry from conventional story-telling: rather than outlining a coherent narrative it seeks to provide a broader impression of the reality inside the prison, such that, McQueen writes: "it's less about the narrative than it is about the abstract, which would have contained some kind of, for lack of a better word, truth."<sup>31</sup> And to be sure, it is precisely this sense of the abstract—the "truth" of feeling rather than of fact—that affectively evokes the reality of the prisoners' incarceration and the precarious political and physical condition they embody therein.

In this regard, *Hunger* (and for that matter, almost all of McQueen's work, which regularly focuses on the physicality and machinations of human bodies) is a film that is definitively corporeal. Essentially concerned with the extreme states of bodies, whether in their vulnerability or in their potential as tools of

political resistance, *Hunger* dwells upon the lived and felt experiences of bodies within spaces where their social and political rights are reduced to almost nothing. This precarious relation between the political body and the imprisoned body (respectively the material embodiment of a political subject and an object of power by which political subjectivity can be violated) stands at the core of the film and the sensory ambiance McQueen evokes. In sum, *Hunger* exemplifies what Vivian Sobchack defines as a carnal cinema, whereby the embodied perception of film earns relative priority over the dominance of rational meaning. Perceived less in the terms of concrete meaning (a set of signifying, representational elements) than in the relay between the preconscious bodily sensations that sound and image effect and the viewer's subsequent apprehension of identifiable elements, *Hunger* is effectively a "cinesthetic" film (to borrow Sobchack's neologism combining cinema with synesthesia and coenesthesia).<sup>32</sup> In communicating sensations between bodies, McQueen evokes the physical and political conditions of spaces wherein the bodies are brought to its limits. As such, the abstract sense of the smell of human waste, of the brutality with which prisoners are viciously beaten, and of Sand's emaciation and fragility all work to conjure the experience of those for whom the base matter of their bodies has become more politically valuable than their existence as political subjects (more valuable and, in turn, more useful, inasmuch as fighting back, growing hair, or smuggling contraband in orifices, for instance, become legitimate means of resistance).

In working to encapsulate this condition, *Hunger* aims to not simply articulate a coherent statement but to register a multivalent and intense affective force. For this reason, the film toes the line between the progression and suspension of narrative, resulting in a story that is, for lack of a better term, *flat*. This is to say, the linear coherence of events does not take priority over the abstract ways in which scenes affect the viewer's experience. Hence, the film takes its time, stretching shots longer than is necessary to "get the point," while keeping cuts minimal, thereby encouraging viewers to linger over images and fully absorb them. Two scenes do particularly well to elucidate this ambivalent relation between narrative and affect: the first is a single static shot that, for a full three minutes, looks down the cell block hallway as a custodian mops urine which inmates have poured under their doors. The second is a sequence principally built around a nearly eighteen minute static shot in which Sands discusses his hunger strike intentions with a visiting priest. While the former scene, despite serving no narrative purpose, devotes remarkable attention to an utterly banal task carried out in real time, the latter constitutes the bulk of the film's dialogue and directly provides its core exegesis. While these two scenes thus work to seemingly opposite ends, they nevertheless do so in effectively the same way: through long, static shots that recall those of structural film, they amplify the viewer's perception, fixing the frame in order to render pictorial space palpable while distending duration in order to make viewers conscious of time's passage. Indeed, the former shot figures as almost an inversion of *Lunch Break*, insofar as it consists of a long institutional hallway (uncannily reminiscent of *Serene Velocity*) alongside protracted motion that recalls *Wavelength* (although here it is not the frame that moves but the custodian as he gradually approaches the foreground). Likewise, the latter scene works to similar ends: refusing the shot/reverse-shot convention associated with dialogue—and through which the illusionism of invisible editing renders real



space virtual—its theatrical mise-en-scène conjures the space and time of the prison, thereby articulating its experiential and affective (rather than representational) dimensions.

The exegetical purpose of the discussion, therefore, does not subordinate the shot's structure to its narrative function, for this most explicit of scenes is also among its most intense. Words and meaning become tied in with the affective intensity of their spatio-temporal context, such that, Elizabeth Lebovici notes, "speech serves to convey the experience of duration."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the narrative and non-narrative (both in this scene and in the film as a whole) intertwine without synthesizing, which is to say that the film alternates between advancing and interrupting narrative as McQueen smuggles in avant-gardist techniques or presents explicatory dialogue as demanding experiences of duration. If, as Lebovici incisively claims, all of McQueen's films are about *endurance*,<sup>34</sup> then these two shots exemplify this tendency, combining narrative cinema (in this case, a film about the experience of endurance) with structural film's self-conscious perception of space and time as a real experience of perceptual endurance. The content of the narrative and the film's structure, in other words, correspond in articulating this experience, for the phenomenological quality of the film's structure, the affective intensity it produces, and its narrative function all work together in expressing the film's aims. Ultimately, it is through this interaction between narrative content and a kind of affective abstraction, and between the representation of a scene and the presentation of its structural properties, that *Hunger* employs film as a political medium. Indeed, in its dual articulation of political content and the phenomenological conditions that attend its enunciation, McQueen creates an exceptionally powerful and brilliantly crafted film.

In sum, through a critical engagement with the formal and experiential nature of cinema, McQueen and Lockhart reconcile the formalist austerity of structural film with the political content they draw through its techniques. As such, they make relevant inroads into the movement while expanding its possibilities, working in and beyond the self-reflexivity of the medium in order to turn attention to the real environments in which subjective experience occurs (but without, however, relying upon the representation of subjective phenomena). To this end, their work encapsulates the spatial and temporal organization of everyday life through which different environments determine the experience of their respective subjects. The factory or the prison, for instance, present more than just the acute formal configurations of institutional spaces (as a film like *Serene Velocity* might suggest), for they also encompass the affective ones in which the experience of space and time is politically charged. In turn, Lockhart and McQueen animate the subjectivity of the worker or the prisoner for whom conventional forms of representation are lacking; by situating the filmic depiction of these subjects in relation to their appropriate phenomenological dispositions, they give rise to an alternate phenomenological experience—that of filmic time and space. Thus, through their examination of film's capabilities, Lockhart and McQueen test the possibilities of inflecting a political consciousness into the medium, experimenting not only with formal and conceptual strategies, but with the ways that film—indeed, film-*qua*-film—can intervene within and affect lived experience.

#### Photo Credits

Sharon Lockhart stills courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles;  
Steve McQueen stills courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery NY.

#### Notes

- 1 P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2002), 348.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 R. Bruce Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Art," in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 127.
- 6 In short, the "trance film" of Deren, developed throughout the 1940s and 1950s, is marked by a concern with expressionistic explorations of dream-like states; the "lyric film" of Brakhage, developed in the 1950s and 1960s, consists of semi- or fully abstract films (often made by painting directly onto celluloid, for instance) which typically feature a constant stream of images that change faster than the eye can see. While formally opposed, these two modes of film work to approximate a hypnagogic vision of subjective psychological phenomena. See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*.
- 7 P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," 351.
- 8 Ibid., 352.
- 9 As she quotes of Husserl: "To every perception there always belongs a horizon of the past, as a potentiality of recollection that can be awakened; and to every recollection there belongs as an horizon, the continuous intervening intentionality of possible recollections (to be activated on my initiative, actively), up to the actual Now of perception." Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," in *The Avant-Garde Film Reader*, edited by P. Adams Sitney, (New York: New York University Press: 1978), 185.
- 10 P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," 359.
- 11 Ibid., 352.
- 12 Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40.
- 13 R. Bruce Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Art," 135.
- 14 Thanks are due to Kelly Montana, whose work on *Lunch Break* provided my introduction to the work as well as my implicit basis for thinking about it.
- 15 These films are, of course, principally displayed within a gallery context, although works such as *Lunch Break* have, in the context of experimental film festivals, shown in theatres.
- 16 Thus, as Norman Bryson describes the film: "space comes before the figure; it is the primary ground across which the figures pass as transients, as qualifications of the depth of field or as incidents placed within it." Norman Bryson, "From Form to Flux," in *Sharon Lockhart* (Chicago and Ostfildern: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Hatje Cantz, 2001), 29.
- 17 The full titles of this work is *Lunch Break Installation*, "Duane Hanson: Sculptures of Life," 14 December 2002—23 February 2003, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 2003.
- 18 *Workers Leaving the Factory*, directed by Harun Farocki (Harun Farocki Film Produktion, 1995).
- 19 None of this, regrettably, is to mention *Lunch Break's* score, specially created by the experimental composer Becky Allen and filmmaker James Benning. The score collages together ambient sounds recorded around the shipyard, ranging from the abstract drone of machinery to, at one point, a Led Zeppelin song playing in the distance.
- 20 See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, "Free Time," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 21 Indeed, such interests date back to his film studies, during which he dropped out of NYU's Tisch School because "they wouldn't let you throw the camera up in the air." Steve McQueen: Profile, *news.bbc.co.uk*, last modified December 1, 1999, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/544419.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/544419.stm)
- 22 Michael Newman, "McQueen's Materialism," in *Steve McQueen* (London: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1999), 32.
- 23 This simplicity does not factor in the subtle themes of racial and post-colonial politics that run throughout McQueen's oeuvre, a topic that is regrettably beyond the scope of this essay.
- 24 Ibid., 24.
- 25 Ibid., 21.
- 26 Quoted in Okwui Enwezor, "Haptic Visions," in *Steve McQueen* (London: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1999), 49.
- 27 TJ Demos, "The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen," *October* 114 (Fall 2003): 71.
- 28 Ibid., 72.
- 29 Jean Fisher, "Intimations of the Real: On Steve McQueen's *Western Deep* and *Caribs' Leap*," in *Steve McQueen: Caribs' Leap/Western Deep* (London: Ibid., 122).
- 30 Ibid., 122.
- 31 Gary Crowder "The Human Body as Political Weapon: An Interview with Steve McQueen," *Cineaste* 34.2 (Spring 2009): 24.
- 32 See Vivian C. Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
- 33 Elizabeth Lebovici, "Steve McQueen: Framing Endurance," *Artpress* 359 (June 2009): 59.
- 34 Ibid., 55.



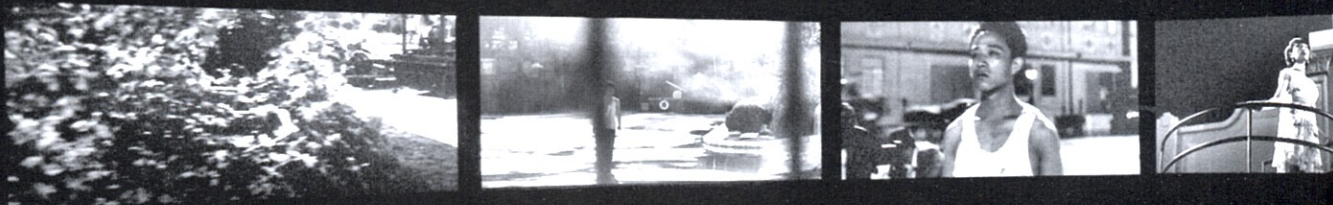
# A Room of Its Own

SCREENING SPACE AND SPECTATORIAL EXPERIENCE IN  
YANG FUDONG'S *FIFTH NIGHT* AND OMER FAST'S *CONTINUITY*

By MARIA SAN FILIPPO

Museum-going, for me, is an edifying, occasionally electrifying experience, yet hardly ever capable of transporting me nearly so rapturously as my favorite films projected on the big screen at the cinema. When visiting a gallery or museum I instinctively gravitate to film and video installations (or, if those are not to be found, photography) rather than canvases and sculptures. Whereas contemporary film debates center around celluloid versus digital projection and movie-going versus the home theatre, screen media exhibited in gallery spaces has become an accepted staple of the contemporary art scene and may well constitute a last refuge for art film to be projected publicly. Nonetheless, as even the casual museum-goer knows, our practice of watching, *in teatro*, a film in its entirety from beginning to end is by no means the standard practice when viewing moving-image media in a gallery space. The more fitting analogy would be to movie-going of a bygone era, when screening programs comprised multiple short features and patrons drifted freely in and out, (a practice that Alfred Hitchcock

*Fifth Night*





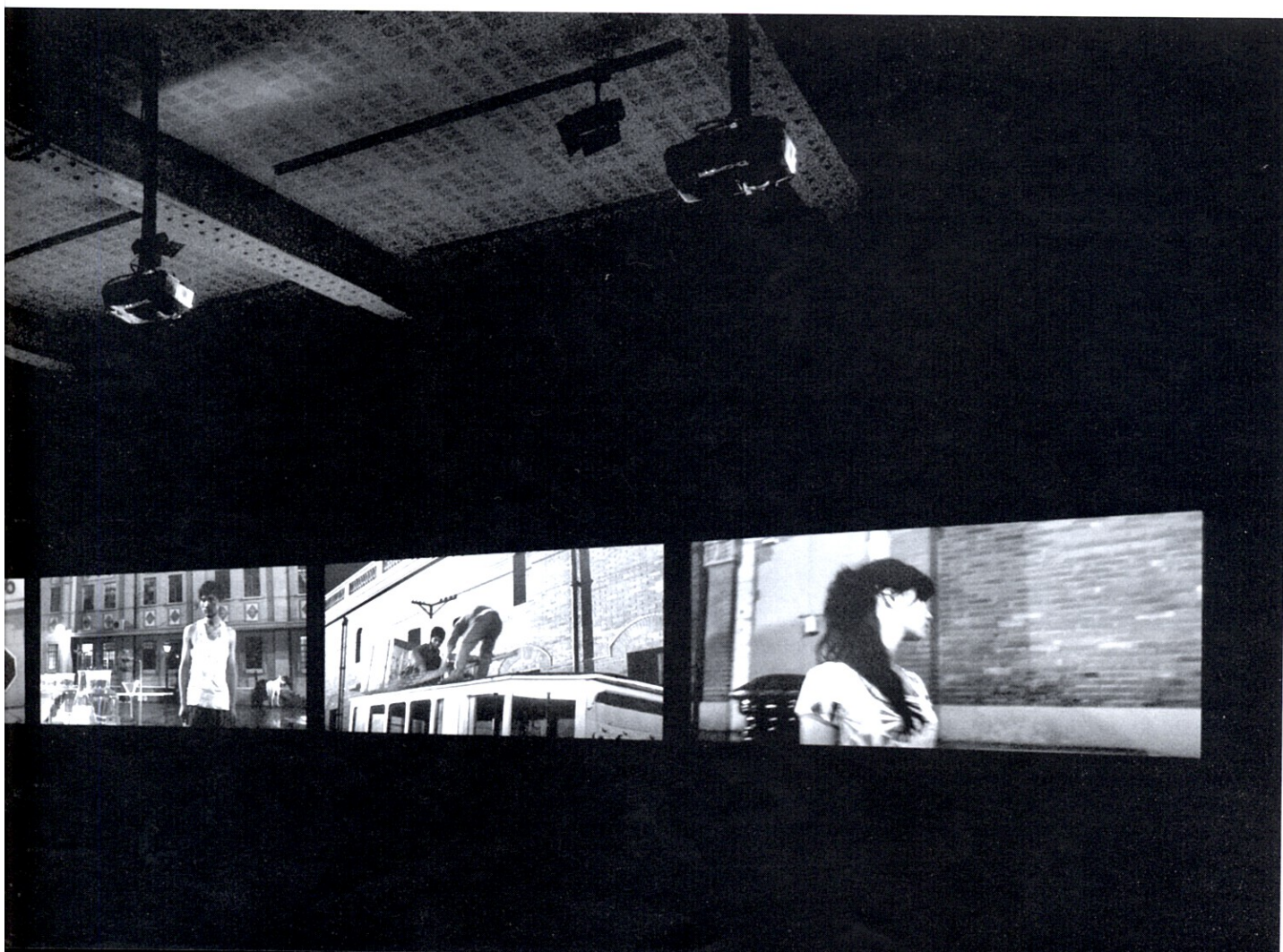
definitively put a halt to with his mandate that no one be allowed into theatres showing *Psycho* [1960] after it had begun). As a way of thinking through the relation between visual art and screen media and their respective curatorial and spectatorial practices, I will explore single pieces by two contemporary film and video artists of international note, Yang Fudong and Omer Fast, that themselves foreground temporal-spatial considerations in conceiving, exhibiting, and experiencing gallery-installed works of screen media.

Too rarely does one encounter a gallery-installed film or video work that seems *ideally* viewed within that forum, let alone works for which a meaningful experience necessitates precisely this spectatorial situation. Chinese-born, Shanghai-based Yang's *Fifth Night* (2010) is an example of such a work, and an exemplar of how rich an encounter with such a work can be. At a mere 10 minutes 37 seconds, it is certainly temporally convenient for the gallery-goer. Far more significant, however, is Yang's accomplishment in creating a work with spatial and spectatorial requirements that a traditional cinema with its single screen and fixed seating would be ill-equipped to provide. So I could review the piece to write this essay, Yang's U.S. gallery, Marian Goodman New York, generously sent me a screener of *Fifth Night* compiled as seven HD video files; viewing these sequentially on my laptop screen made for a far more stilted, less transporting experience than I'd enjoyed during my initial encounter with the work at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

In that venue, *Fifth Night* was projected on seven separate

but aligned, theatre-sized screens stretching along one wall of a cavernous rectangular space, enclosed and sufficiently dark that the film's black and white images shimmered. Like this spatial configuration, the title of the piece places us in a dream space, "the fifth stage in the sleep cycle [being] a period when dreams are particularly lucid, a veritable magic hour for sleepers."<sup>1</sup> Movie-going, long compared to dreaming, is also conjured by the film's production design and aesthetic qualities—shooting on the backlot of a Shanghai film studio haphazardly filled with artificial-looking sets and stray props, in the chiaroscuro tones of elegant epics, Yang clearly alludes to Shanghai's golden age of film production in the 1930s. (The number "1936" appears prominently on a building's facade.) Reminiscent of the uncanny quality of photographer Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980) and of filmmaker Guy Maddin's evocative use of silent cinema-era techniques, *Fifth Night* presents itself both as paean to and parody of the classical cinema both of China and of the West.

Narratively, on any given screen, virtually nothing happens. A young man in a white undershirt flecked with what looks like bloodstains walks in a daze through a city plaza at night; two wide-eyed young men in neat but worn suits, struggling under the weight of suitcases, gaze about despondently; a demure-looking young woman in a flowered dress wanders amid rickshaws and horse-drawn carriages that cross the square diagonally. The characters' gestures range from tentative to somnambulistic; their expressions are wary, as if finding







*Fifth Night*

themselves in a strangely familiar though neither clearly recognizable nor hospitable space. Their near-silent movements among a fire smoldering in a rusted barrel and candles flickering on a Buddhist shrine give the place a desolate, even apocalyptic feel. Figures occasionally cross paths, meeting eyes hesitantly but never speaking; their actions and postures carry the affect of avant-garde dance, while the soundtrack consists of John Cage-like mechanical droning. So unreadable are these characters that the eye is invited to wander across the mise-en-scene and to appreciate the camera's languorous traveling shots, each just over ten minutes in length. Scanning slowly left and right, occasionally retreating behind barriers, this disembodied point of view prompts one's own recognition that the seven screens divide the diegetic space into disjointed yet spatially permeable, temporally looped frames of action in which the same structures appear and the same characters cross multiple screens. Gradually the continuity between these projected images comes to envelop the viewer loosely in a semi-enclosure not unlike a city square or a theatre, as we cognitively join the disparate frames into a cohesive seeming whole.

As program notes distributed at his Vancouver Art Gallery show make clear, Yang designed the project mindful of its anticipated positioning in a gallery setting:

**Audiences in these situations are not sedentary, but tend to move through the space freely. *Fifth Night* works with these conditions, effecting an immersive viewing experience the artist calls "spatialized film," in which a number of aesthetic and narrative possibilities emerge with each passing view. In this way, claims the artist, "the audience re-directs the film" as they move through the installation.<sup>2</sup>**

The piece is exquisitely choreographed, yet without any climactic build or final reveal; only small mysteries are half-solved, as in the glimpse we're given of an automobile barely





pausing as the two men with suitcases are unceremoniously shoved out a rear door onto the street. In registering these variants of information accumulating at different vantage points the viewer is reminded of how powerfully one's spectatorial position—both in the sense of filmic interpellation and experiential knowledge—determines what one sees, and of how elusive any objective perception of the environment around us must always be.

The term 'site-specific art' usually refers to the ephemeral and/or preconceived placement of 'earthworks' such as Robert Smithson's Great Salt Lake sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or permanent installations such as Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (1977) and *The Broken Kilometer* (1979), longtime residents of the city's Soho neighborhood that fill two loft spaces, respectively, with 197 cubic meters of earth and 500 solid brass rods each two meters in length. But a video work such as Pipilotti Rist's *Ever Is Over All* (1997) could also be called site-specific, in that its instructions for installation prescribe that two screens are positioned in the corner of a room, their respective images overlapping slightly at the line where they meet. The single audio track also serves to connect their thematically related though tonally dissonant images: an oversaturated

close-up of a flower in full bloom on one, in the other a pixieish young woman (played by the artist) skipping along a sidewalk pausing at intervals to gleefully swing, as if wielding a crowbar, what looks like an oversized floppy flower at car windows that shatter violently upon impact. Far less humorous but also making significant use of the juxtaposition between opposing screens is Shirin Neshat's 1998 two-screen installation *Turbulent*, projected on two screens facing one another that tightly confine the viewer between their vying images of two radically different musical performances that speak volumes about their respective gendered experience in contemporary Iranian society.

Essential for fully registering the by turns engulfing and alienating effects of *Turbulent*'s male crooning and female wailing is its installation within an immersive though not conventionally cinematic space, not always provided for film and video works exhibited in gallery spaces. Consider Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–1986), usually displayed as a slideshow projected on an interior wall, home movie style, and accompanied by music from the period. Overstuffed cushions strewn about for lounging would be a nice touch, but the intended effect of evoking 8mm porn flicks projected at a deca-



dent, drug-fuelled gathering is appreciable. And yet when I came across Goldin's piece relegated to a well-lit corner of Boston's Institute for Contemporary Art recently, I was already somewhat irritated at the clicking sounds and strains of classical rock songs that bled in to adjacent rooms and robbed Goldin's work of its sleazy underground cachet. On the flip side, take James Turrell's sensory deprivation experiments, for which the detached, darkened viewing space of a gallery provides the perfect state of temporary immersion. Not as technically necessary a setting as for Turrell's work but also deeply affecting is Berlin's Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism (2008), a Brutalist box by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset with a single window permanently housed in a clearing on the edges of the Tiergarten. On a frigid New Year's afternoon, I peered inside at the projected scene of two young men lovingly embracing in a sun-dappled pastoral setting. It provoked in me such a longing to enter their cloistered confines as to convey viscerally its subjects' divergent experiences of acceptance and exclusion, shelter and banishment, heart-warming affection and soul-killing oppression.

For these memorable works, delivering a meaningful experience calls for the precise spatio-temporal contours that their site-specific installations offer: fully absorbing, engaging our scopophilic drive, yet relatively short in duration and not confined to the single-screen and fixed seating setup of traditional cinemas. Longer works that are non-narrative and can accommodate a detached or intermittent spectatorship are also, it seems to me, ideally exhibited in gallery space but nonetheless are habitually projected in conventional cinemas. The 3-hours-plus screening of Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966), projected in split screen with a single audio track, had me climbing the walls when I viewed it at the Harvard Film Archive; I could watch Nico comb her hair only so long before the spectacle of narcissism grew unbearably tedious. More demanding still is Warhol's *Empire* (1964), which documents minute shifts in light and shadow across a (seemingly) single shot of 485 minutes duration of the Empire State Building. No doubt there's an argument to be made that Warhol's exercises in minimalism (or masochism) is exactly what he intended for the viewer, yet it felt to me far likelier that Warhol was imagining a less studious (or sober) spectatorial experience.

At the risk of drawing the line too glibly, one could posit that filmmaking with a cumulative narrative is best served by cinematic theatrical space whereas consistently conceptual filmmaking is ideally experienced within gallery space; just think of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in comparison with Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993). There are works in which slow-build micro-narratives depend upon duration for their payoff, however subtle—the often frustrating languor of Tsai Ming-liang's films, for example—in which case the traditional theatrical experience ensures (or at least encourages) the continuous viewing from beginning to end on which the film's impact depends. Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002) of five films varying in length from 40 minutes to 3 hours seems another prime candidate for viewing within a gallery space rather than the theatrical settings in which the cycle toured in 2010—but for the opposite reason from *Fifth Night*. Barney's films, deliberately baroque and astonishing, almost immediately register as high art, postmodern pastiche of Hollywood spectacle; with their duration just another marker of excess, they do not demand comprehensive viewings. One might characterize as a half-way option that which was

devised for Christian Marclay's 24 hour montage *The Clock* (2010), a traveling show mounted for maximum effect as cinematic spectacle by playing to a select number of viewers who queue up to gain entry into the hushed inner sanctum of a museum theater. Whatever one thinks of Marclay's execution, it's clear that his project reprises the aforementioned practice of viewing films at random intervals, never (except for a few stalwart souls) in its entirety. Marclay also rejuvenates the mostly forgotten trend of the midnight movie, which for me was giddily resurrected through my unaccustomed nocturnal visit to the ghostly Museum of Fine Arts Boston, eager to see what Marclay had arranged for the stroke of midnight (I was not disappointed).

Israeli-born, American-raised and educated, now Berlin-based Omer Fast's *Continuity* (2012) is a 40 minute color and sound film that emphasizes narrative to the same extent that Yang veers away from it, yielding an equally wondrous spectatorial experience yet one not ideally suited for the incomplete viewing that the majority of gallery-goers will likely give it. As with Yang, Fast's choice of title signals his desire for a special type of audience understanding across the film's disparate-seeming parts, an understanding fully achievable only when one has viewed the complete work. Viewed in strict diegetic sequence, the work builds to something clearly signaled as a climactic revelation if not a conventional resolution. Four variations on a theme, projected on a loop, chronicle the arrival home to a German exurb of a young man returning from military service in Afghanistan. While the characters of his parents are played throughout by two elegantly expressive performers who appear to have wandered out of a Michael Haneke film, a procession of different young men assume the role of their son. In four otherwise near-identical segments, the parents pick up their uniformed son at a deserted depot, subject him to discomforting debriefing and seemingly excessive displays of physical affection. At a certain point in turn, each son abruptly and inexplicably disappears, and the day's journey begins anew. What exactly these characters' relationship to one another is and how recent Western military intervention in the Middle East relate to the situation remain questions throughout, making for an uneasily symbolic, dread-filled waking dream that combines to create a mesmerizing spectatorial experience. My initial viewing of *Continuity* was at Toronto's The Power Plant gallery, where I caught just enough of it to leave me dazzled and intrigued. Reviewing it sequentially and completely, though again on my laptop, left me properly enraptured by its surrealistic, weighty ambiguity, but far less awed by its stylistic lushness, underwater pacing, and ominous atmosphere; the experience was akin to watching a David Lynch or David Cronenberg film on one's cell phone. Fast's eye and feel for cinematic style and narrative, distinctly reminiscent of these filmmakers yet unmistakably personal and political, lead me to hope fervently for Fast to make a feature-length film to be exhibited theatrically while there are still art house theaters left.

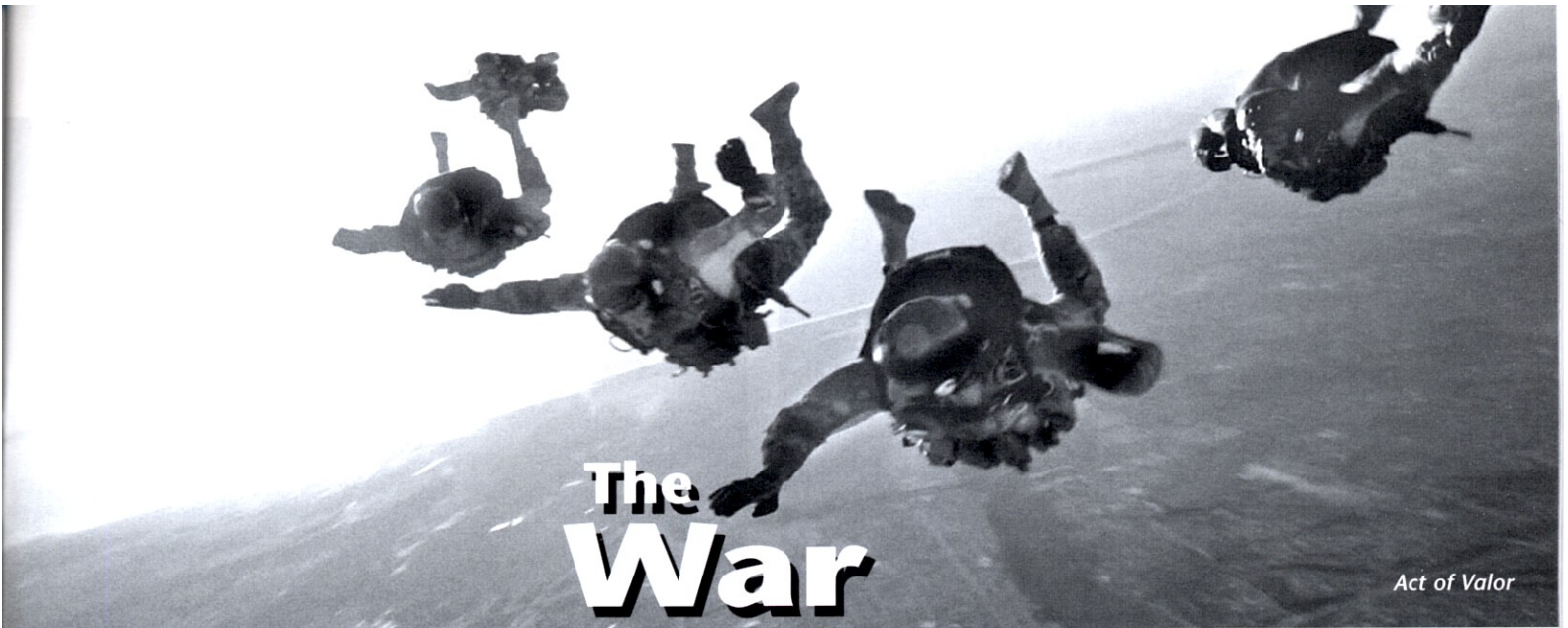
#### Photo Credit

Yang Fudong stills courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery NY. Omer Fast stills courtesy of gb agency, Paris/Arratia Beer, Berlin.

#### Notes

- 1 Mandy Ginson, "Yang Fudong *Fifth Night*," Program notes, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2012.
- 2 Ibid. See also Yang Fudong, "Interview with Daina Augaitis," *Yishu* 11, no. 3, May/June 2012, 58–65.





Act of Valor

# The War on Art and Zero Dark Thirty

By MICHAEL BOUGHN

**"What gives a film its power, grandeur, and beauty is not on the screen. It breaks through the screen. It is the desire, the love carried by the film, which is precisely what allows one to speak of the film otherwise than as an object, a work, or a production."**

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration*<sup>1</sup>

**"I like it. It's got layers... you know? lots of layers."**

—Hans/Christopher Walken, *Seven Psychopaths* (Martin McDonagh 2012)

Americans love their wars. Given the opportunity, they will declare war on just about anything that moves. You've got your war on poverty, which some people might mistakenly confuse with the Occupy Movement, but which actually was a government sponsored war back in the dim recesses of history when the government still pretended people were more important than banks. You've got your war on drugs, now in its 62nd glorious year— and counting. You've got your war on terror, now in its 12th glorious year. You've got your war on Iraq, which is best left forgotten (along with the War on Viet Nam). You've got your war on the family— well, at least according to the Tea Baggers. And the list goes on: the war on crime, the war on women, the war on cancer, the war on gangs, and even the war on Christmas. And lurking around the edges of all these other declared and undeclared wars is their hidden, bastard sibling, the war on art.

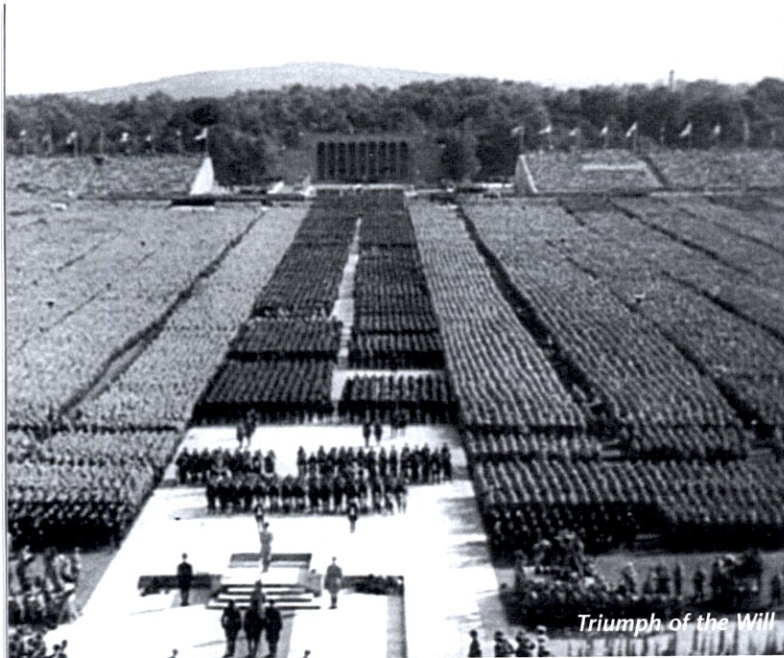
The war on art is constant, but unlike other wars, it is mostly

undeclared and often invisible. It lurks in the dark corners of the culture waiting for some 'elitist' artist to cross a line before bursting into full scale hostilities. It's an old American tradition. As long as art stays confined to scenes of the sun setting over the Pacific or clever, ironic poems about broken hearts, or even clear moral declarations on the evil of, well, whatever—homophobia, gay marriage, slavery, crazy Iranian militants—all is peaceful. But offend someone, challenge the status quo, put a crucifix in a jar of urine, or write a realistic book about the stupidity of racism and slavery, and howls rip through the nation. Committee meetings are called, investigations launched, budgets threatened, grants cancelled—until morality triumphs, and everyone goes back to feeling secure and smug.

For some reason, a lot of artists seem drawn to cross that line, even to set up camp on the other side. Not out of perversity, and often not even on purpose, but simply because that's what art demands, to be outside and further so the work can happen. It's not a grudge against morality; it's just that morality is not that relevant to the work which, if it is real work, tends to find itself in an encounter with the world's excessive sense. Art raises questions that propel the mind not toward answers but towards questions, into a bewildered awe, and the tight boundaries moralism imposes are antagonistic to that.

That's why what is art and what isn't will always be the stuff of unresolvable fights. While the war sometimes may seem to be specific to this issue or that (e.g. sacrilege, torture, sex, violence), behind those issues it has to do with art's excess because that excess is what is always beyond control, what overflows the given, what unsettles: Michelangelo's nudes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; Mark Twain's dialogue accurately reflect-





ing the voices of his world; Stravinsky's dissonance and bizarre instrumentation; Duchamp's—well, pretty much anything Duchamp did. And art is certainly not a passive victim of these contests. It is often art's own war with a culture of universal equivalence which demands that it legitimize itself through politics or economics, or that it confirm the 'given'.

The outrage over art's insistence on unsettling the world is part of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a "horizon of subtraction". In a world where everything is equivalent to a price, where exchange value is all the value left us, the mind closes in on itself shutting down any sense beyond the immediately, materially present. Within that horizon of subtraction, the work of art is assumed to coincide with itself, to be content within a signification. It is a closed structure, utterly determined and with no outside. Any attempt to exceed that horizon of subtraction is met with explosions of rhetorical outrage. Usually the explosions are politically specific, the artist having excited the ire of moralists on either the right or the left. The recent attacks—and they are attacks, not simply criticism—on Katherine Bigelow's film, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), are unusual because their rage comes from across the political spectrum. On the right, the film was condemned by no less than Senator John McCain, war hero and foiled presidential candidate, who claimed Bigelow's film, first of all, was slandering America by falsely proposing that the US ever used torture in the so-called war-on-terror; and secondly, was traitorously fuelling Islamist extremism. *Zero Dark Thirty* was even briefly the object of a U.S. Senate investigation that was cancelled immediately after the film was snubbed at the Academy Award ceremony.

Meanwhile on the left, various liberals and radicals claimed the movie is an apology for torture. Ed Asner and Martin Sheen, two usually progressive actors, criticized the film and suggested Academy members should ignore it in the awards competition, which they in fact did.<sup>2</sup> A number of law professors including Marjorie Cohn<sup>3</sup> at the Thomas Jefferson School of Law and Ramzi Kassem<sup>4</sup> at City University of New York School of Law,

issued long analyses damning the film's representation of torture and arguing that Bigelow and screen writer Mark Boal were 'complicit' in defending torture as a useful tool for extracting information. Capping off the explosion of moralist outrage were celebrity radicals Slavoj Žižek<sup>5</sup> and Naomi Wolf<sup>6</sup> who leapt on the bandwagon charging that the film is "a gift to American power" and "propaganda" for the use of torture. Wolf went so far as to scurrilously compare Bigelow's film to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. The charge of propaganda is interesting because it raises the question of art, but then evades the implications the question raises. What is propaganda and what is art, and what is their relation?

What is at stake is the world itself, our thinking of it, our encounter with its plenitude. Depending on how gestures are imagined and executed, what thinking animates them, how they are composed in the work, they may open us to that plenitude or close it down. Stanley Cavell, in a discussion of the conventional gestures of film, points out that the slow motion, floating sequence that opens Riefenstahl's film has a very different resonance when used in other films like *The World of Henry Orient* (George Roy Hill, 1969) or *Popi* (Arthur Hiller, 1964).<sup>7</sup> In Riefenstahl's film, it indicates the slow descent of power into the world in a god-like entrance. In both *Popi* and *The World of Henry Orient* on the other hand, it is part of the invocation of the freedom of childhood from the weight of the (adult) world. While Riefenstahl uses the convention to lockdown emotional meaning, Arthur Hiller and George Roy Hill use it to suggest an opening.

Propaganda differs from art precisely in that it locks up sense in a determined and specific meaning, whereas art opens it. Propaganda is meant to shut down thinking, imprison it in a fixed determination, where art opens thinking up to the restitution of the horizon, its reopening into the world beyond it. The power of *Triumph of the Will* rests in its overwhelming sense of a world fully signified, to use a further distinction of Nancy's. Every gesture in the film is composed with an eye toward pre-



senting Hitler and National Socialism as the heroic saviours of Germany. It mobilizes emotions toward a communion of awe. Nancy argues that art does the opposite, that it “disengages the senses from signification, or rather, it disengages the world from signification....”<sup>8</sup> Art in that sense is compensation for the closing-in that otherwise defines the limits of our condition in this history where we find ourselves.

What makes this possible, the exuberance of compensation, is the utter specificity of each detail that makes up “images whose meaning exceed the circumstances that provide their occasion,” a quote attributed to Walker Evans by a character in Elmore Leonard’s novel, *La Brava*.<sup>9</sup> John Berger calls it “nature.” “Art,” he says, “is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally.... Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one.”<sup>10</sup> If propaganda, like ideology which is necessary to it, closes sense down, imprisons it within the strict parameters of its overdetermined images, art introduces us to the incommensurable and invites us to an intimacy with it, where that intimacy is tied up with the openings of thinking. This is the tension between the poles of the possible gestures associated with the various arts. At the one end, specificity demands attention to details, both in the work itself and in the relation the work sets up between itself and the world of works in order to open the horizon of subtraction. At the other end, broad generalities overcome specificity while laying claim to truth in order to overwhelm thinking with emotion and so subject it to configurations of communion and closure.

At the heart of the attacks on Bigelow’s film is a reduction that identifies the meaning of the film with a single element of its plot, as if the film is never more than the story it tells. That element is “getting bin Laden.” Once the film is reduced to that the critics can ignore its specificities in order to claim it is nothing more than a story about the efficacy of torture in that pursuit. But it is precisely the specificities that harbour the intricacies of the film’s sense. Berger offers a terrific example in his reading of Monet’s *Impression, Soleil Levant*. The critics of

Bigelow’s film would probably see Monet’s painting as being about a guy in a boat watching the sun come up. What Berger finds in the painting’s specificities is a remarkable change “in the relation between seer and seen” that infuses the painting with a sense of metaphysical homelessness:

**The transparency of the thin pigment representing the water—the thread of the canvas showing through it, the swift broken-straw-like brush strokes suggesting ripples of spars, the scrubbed-in area of shadow, the reflections staining the water, the optical truthfulness and the objective vagueness, all this renders the scene makeshift, threadbare, decrepit. It is an image of homelessness.<sup>11</sup>**

Under Berger’s careful and meticulous eye, the ‘guy in the boat’ yields the weight of an enormous historical transformation that redefines human possibility in an era when the ground of existence disappears along with the possibility of representation. The details of the art propel thinking toward a revelation. But, as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit propose, this relation to art involves an “effort” that “is the work of spectatorship.”<sup>12</sup> It involves, “first of all, allowing ourselves to be transformed from one mode of vision to another, to be jolted out of our ingrained habits of cinematic viewing.”<sup>13</sup> It is questionable whether the various critics of Bigelow’s film—right and left—have any interest in being jolted out of anything.

Some art demands such a transformation. Other art, not so much. *Argo* (2012), a film released around the same time as *Zero Dark Thirty*, also about the conflict between the U.S. and forces of radical Islam, and which went on to reap numerous awards including best picture at the same Academy Awards presentation that snubbed Bigelow’s film, is in the *not so much* category. No matter how much effort the spectator puts into viewing *Argo*, no jolt is forthcoming. All that the details of the film yield is a further sense of closure. The heroic efforts of the

*Zero Dark Thirty*







CIA to rescue American hostages from a hostile Iran remain exactly that and nothing more. It is a good example of very well-made propaganda. As a kind of war film (it's context is a conflict between America and an implacable enemy), it never escapes the caricatures of the genre—utterly evil enemies hell-bent on destroying freedom loving Americans. Even the one exception, the Iranian housekeeper at the Canadian embassy, reinforces the stereotype of the maddened Iranian masses by her singularity and her ultimate escape from Iran. Nothing in the film points beyond the story. There is no provocation to thought, no jolt.

*Zero Dark Thirty*, on the other hand, is powerfully provocative from the very first scene, refusing to allow the viewer to settle into a comfortable relation to the screened images. It, too, is a war movie, so what's at stake in our thinking of the movie begins with what kind of war we are given, how it is given to us, and what is asked from us in that exchange. Bigelow is fascinated with the genre, with the specific realities of war and their effects on those caught up in them. Her previous film, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), looked closely at the intense relationships that develop between soldiers constantly exposed to violence and death. That war—the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq—is related to the war at the heart of *Zero Dark Thirty*, but is different in crucial ways. *The Hurt Locker* is the story of an urban guerrilla war, and while the war is unconventional, it is still recognizable. The Americans are trying to hold onto an actual place, while the guerrilla fighters, occupying no territory themselves, but ubiquitous, seek to drive them out.

By contrast, the war in *Zero Dark Thirty* is barely recognizable as a war at all. Until the last scene, the Americans are usually pictured not suited up on battlefields or in devastated urban landscapes but wearing jeans and tee-shirts or business suits in rooms and offices of varying sizes, talking, while their enemies are nowhere to be seen except in sporadic attacks on civilians in distant places: London, Riyadh, Islamabad. There is no physically occupied space at stake. The “battles” take place in hotels

and buses where Islamist fighters—also known as terrorists—massacre various groups of civilians with guns and bombs, presumably with the objective of forcing governments to change policy, although it is never clear. This war has no location, no battlegrounds where opposing armed forces meet, and its primary weapon, at least on the American side, is not munitions but information. It is neither a hot war, a cold war, nor even what Jean Baudrillard calls a ‘non-war’, a war waged in the media, though it has elements of that. It is a unique war, and so a unique war movie, and part of what is at stake is the struggle to understand it.

Even so, the film is part of the war genre, a genre whose seeming unity contains a hive of differences generated as much by political agendas as artistic ones. War movies produced during the heat of war notoriously yield to an impulse for propaganda, while those made with the advantage of hindsight tend to be more thoughtful. *Back to Bataan* (1945) is as different from *The Thin Red Line* (1998) as *The Green Berets* (1968) is from *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). *Zero Dark Thirty* is unusual for, among other things, critically examining an ongoing conflict. Those accusing it of being propaganda clearly haven't seen *Act of Valor* (2012).<sup>14</sup>

As with all genres, the determining rules are as much sites for invention as for restriction. Because of the implicit politics of both war itself and its representations, difference is all the more intense, even violent. John Wayne's World War II movies made no pretext of examining the dark side of war or the humanity of the enemy. They were geared toward rallying support for the war effort by demonizing the Japanese and glorifying the heroism of American soldiers and their allies. Demonizing the enemy is the primary goal of propaganda war movies as a way of mobilizing the home front. One of the central scenes in *Back to Bataan* involves a Japanese captain who orders the benign principal of a Pilipino school, Senor Bello to haul down the U.S. flag. When Bello refuses, the Japanese captain hangs him from the flag pole in front of his horrified students. We understand





there is a specific, limited, and total purpose to this imagery and to the film it defines. The same is true of the opening scene of *Act of Valor* where a terrorist uses an ice cream truck to kill the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines, taking out an entire schoolyard of children he has attracted to the ice cream truck in the process. As he walks away from the explosion, a burning, screaming child runs around the corner out of the flames behind him to nail down the meaning and make sure we get the point. These set-ups are similar to scenes in *The Fighting Seabees* (1944), *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *The Green Berets* and any number of other war movies. With variations, they could be called 'the evil, duplicitous enemy murders the good natured, naïve American scenes'; their conventional goal is to produce an emotional response in the spectator that involves the desire for revenge based on an objectification of the enemy.

Vengeance also enters *Zero Dark Thirty*, but as part of the emotional discourse in the film. The set-up involves the protagonist Maya/Jessica Chastain's friend, Jessica/Jennifer Ehle, and her meeting with a doctor, an alleged Jordanian mole in Al Qaeda. As she and others wait in Camp Chapman in Afghanistan for the doctor to arrive, a strong sense of foreboding builds. The foreboding has something to do with the vast, almost hostile distances the approaching car moves through as it approaches the fortified encampment, like some inevitable disaster. It is amplified by the sound track, the haunting "Night Song" by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan which seems to promise doom, a doom all the more insistent as Jessica demands that the hesitant U.S. soldiers allow the car into the heavily fortified camp without the usual search. The vastness of the desert is then offset by cramped shots of body parts in the approaching car, a hand on the wheel, flashes of an undefined face in the back seat. The music, the cinematography, all create a sense of the approaching disaster that peaks as an Afghan man exits the car, his hand in his robe, the soldiers yelling at him to show his hands, the panic rising, till the inevitable blast occurs.

In the final seconds before the explosion, the camera cuts

from Jessica, beginning to show doubt, to three different soldiers whose increasing anxiety and near panic are evident as they scream at the Afghani and threaten to shoot him; and then to Jessica again who, in a final flash, seems both querulous and resigned to impending disaster. She (a "mother of three," as she is described on the radio report) has recently threatened to kill the Afghani if he fails to realize his promise as a mole, and now seems suddenly to understand too late that the tables have been turned on her. The camera then pulls back to the middle distance as the bomb goes off, and almost immediately it withdraws over the camp, locating the explosion in a kind of objective frame, the cloud of smoke within the fortified camp surrounded by the desert. The scene reeks of inevitability. From the very first moment of the sequence, the events unfold toward an inexorable doom. And when the doom occurs, it is located dispassionately in the emptiness of the desert.

There is no upwelling of emotion, no surge of vengeful feelings, except for Maya's. As the wind blows the smoke away, the scene cuts to her last text message: "answer when you can . . .", then to her face as she swivels to hear the news of the bombing, then back to the camp in the desert, smoke billowing, as a news announcer describes the incident. In the following scene, Maya sits curled up on the floor in shock, drinking. After she receives the (ultimately false) news that Abu Ahmed has been killed, her colleague Jack/Harold Perrineau enters, and asks her what she is going to do. Looking slightly demonic, her haggard face etched with shadow as if the roles had been reversed here and she was the one now driven by maniacal hatred, she responds, "I am going to smoke everybody involved in this op, and then I'm going to kill bin Laden."

This is the classic, generic moment in a propaganda film when the audience's resolve to fight the enemy should reflect the hardened resolve of the characters on the screen. But that's not what Bigelow gives us. Instead of hardened resolve, Jack (who is a kind of Greek chorus commenting on the dramatic action) first drops his eyes, then turns them away from Maya,



as if he can't look at her, and looks down. It is a gesture that can only be read as defeat or resignation. There is certainly no approval in it, no resolve. This is hardly the expected commitment to vengeance.

The nature of the war itself, as it is reflected in Maya's transformation, is the stake here. At the beginning of the film, Maya enters the space of the film from outside, literally from the black screen that opens the movie punctuated by the voices recorded on September 11, 2001. The penultimate voice is that of a young woman on a phone in the World Trade Center crying, "I'm going to die" while an emergency operator attempts to reassure her help is on the way. The final words are the operator's who mutters "Oh, my God." The film then cuts to an interrogation room where a prisoner is strung up and Dan/Jason Clarke enters with a group of masked people including Maya following him. Dan and the others, tall bulky men in fatigue pants and black tee-shirts, are clearly part of the place. Maya, a petite woman dressed in a business suit, is not. She arrives from outside, from "spaces designated as the necessary but unpainted extensions of certain formal elements within the work" as Bersani and Dutoit put it in their discussion of Caravaggio and Godard's work.<sup>15</sup> This outside both contextualizes the events that are about to occur in the film, and locates the viewers who are about to witness them.

The outside Maya arrives from is the Homeland. Once it is invoked, it operates as an implicit backdrop for everything that happens. Maya enters the war, a fresh recruit, green, naïve, innocent, but eager to fight the good fight without yet realizing the horror implicit in it—a classic, conventional figure in the war movie. The good fight involves, as always, defending America and its values—freedom, democracy, basic human decency—against some tyrannical threat; in this case, the threat associated with the young girl's voice from the World Trade Center. As happens in so many war movies, she stumbles into the brutal fact of war, her innocence sticking out, as they say, like a sore thumb.

This introduces the scene that provoked the moralist hysteria against the film—a graphic representation of the "enhanced interrogation techniques" authorized by the Bush administration under the guidance of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld for use against captured "terrorists." This scene is remarkable for the way it presents torture, specifically in the dynamic established by the camera angles. Ammar/Reda Kateb has obviously been savagely beaten when we first see him; strung up by his arms, hanging from wires, his face cut and bruised. As Dan begins his interrogation, the camera angles down on Ammar and up at Dan. The shots down on Ammar embody a brutal power over a helpless, wounded victim. The shots up at Dan reinforce that sense of unbridled power and viciousness. The result is a deep emotional confusion, with the viewer's point-of-view destabilized. Since the scene comes hard on the heels of the 9/11 victim's voice, it ought to be a clear and unambiguous announcement of righteous anger and revenge. Dan's anger is palpable, but the viewer's ability to identify with it is troubled and subverted by the cinematography which forces her to sympathize with Ammar as well.

All that we see of Maya in this brief scene is her eyes through a slit in the balaclava that covers her face like a niqab. They are full of muted horror. When Dan walks by her on the way out, she shifts her eyes down, as if in shame. Outside the room, with the balaclava and jacket removed, Maya is revealed as a young, petite woman dressed in a business pant suit that would be

more suitable in a New York law office than a black ops site in Afghanistan. She is utterly out of place, a fact Dan notes with irony. She is also clearly in shock, but determined to follow through on her commitment. Dan offers her the possibility of watching the interrogation on a monitor, but she refuses, just as she refuses to put the balaclava back on. Young, naïve, idealistic and female, she is compelled to prove herself in what is clearly a challenge to her moral sense.

Once back in the room, Maya stands hugging herself for comfort. When Ammar refuses to talk and Dan prepares for the waterboarding scene, the camera lingers on Maya who radiates moral agony, glancing around the room so as not to have to look at what is happening. After Dan throws Ammar to the ground and pins him, he tells Maya to get him the bucket, which she does, though obviously uncomfortable with the request. As the torture proceeds, her revulsion becomes the focus of the scene as the camera repeatedly returns to her face.

The meaning of the scene refuses to settle into some clear signification. Located immediately after the 9/11 calls, it opens as a site of revenge. The camera undercuts that, however, forcing the viewer to identify with the victim. But Dan's anger is the viewer's anger as well, as he recites Ammar's crimes and his material support of the attack on the World Trade Center. That identification itself is undercut by the continuing focus on Maya's disgust and revulsion. And that is brought into question as well by her participation in the torture, a necessity if this petite woman is to gain entry into the "man's world" of the interrogation room, if the green recruit is to be accepted by the hardened veteran.

It is an episode of unrelenting brutality viewed from multiple perspectives; its repercussions emanate through the film toward an ultimate doom. Maya is the measure of the progress and the doom, and the scene where Jack turns away from her transformation with resignation and defeat is the site where the ambiguities of the opening torture scene resolve—as much as anything resolves in this film—into a monstrous vengeance. Maya's transformation is the heart of the film's meaning, and that is lost if we lose sight of her extraordinary ambivalence at the beginning, and the sense of duty, even justice, that underlies it.

Maya does not simply "learn the ropes" in that opening scene, as one of Bigelow's critics facetiously proposed.<sup>16</sup> Moved by a sense of duty and a drive to right the wrong of 9/11, she wills herself to participate in an activity she (and we) finds morally repulsive in order to defend the Homeland, as she puts it. But in the scene that follows Jessica's death, vengeance replaces justice as the motivation for the pursuit of bin Laden and the nature of the war starts to come into focus. Whatever the development here is 'about', it reveals a war with no purpose and no politics other than revenge, a 'war' stripped of all illusions of glory, honour, justice, idealism, even measurable geo-political goals, and revealed as payback. It has become in essence a *feud*. And it has happened with the same kind of inevitability that haunted Jessica's death.

A feud is a strange, informal kind of war. Not exactly Deleuze's war machine which, though informal, operates within a nomadic potential. There are elements of that, but the war machine exists in relation to the state as a remnant of something that existed before the state, and the feud is purely personal. A feud is privatized war. Not just privatized as the US military regime is, so that the war profits flow to Haliburton and Academi (a war machine formerly as Blackwater), but privatized right down to the motives for the war. You could look at a feud





as privatized war without the booty, a war whose sole motivation is vengeance for cascading acts of violence that have no ascertainable origin and no end other than mutual annihilation.

In any case, this is unlike any war we are familiar with. It is thoroughly post-modern in that it has moved beyond nation states battling each other with armies over territory and resources. None of the old vocabulary works. The most traditional military dimension of the film is the last real-time thirty minute Seal attack on bin Laden's compound. This attack reveals a war even the soldiers are uneasy with, a systematic assassination in which numerous unarmed non-combatants are killed in cold blood and bin Laden himself is simply executed. Children witness the slaughter of their parents while women and other children scream and whimper in the background.

One eerie scene, and its aftermath, is particularly provocative. Justin/Chris Pratt leads a group of Seals in through a blown door where Abrar/Noureddine Haijijoujou, in a nightshirt, tries to shoot them, but is shot instead. As he falls, his wife/Nour Alkawaja rushes in screaming in grief and fear, throws herself on his body, then starts to pick up his rifle. Justin shoots her twice in the back. She falls and as he rolls her body over with his foot, the camera lingers on her face, the face of a beautiful young woman framed by flowing black hair, and then, next to her, Abrar, her handsome young husband. Justin then shoots Abrar in the heart to make sure he is dead.

At this point the camera withdraws from the room so that we see Justin framed in a window. His head and upper torso are visible, but nothing else other than the sudden flash of one more shot. Since Abrar is already dead, the final shot can only be another for his wife. The camera then cuts to an extreme

close up of Justin's eye illuminated by the green light of the night vision goggles as he stares through the scope of his rifle. A small dot of white light illuminates the centre of his pupil, the rest of his face in shadow, as he gazes unblinking at the two bodies. The shot holds for five long seconds, forcing us to consider what is going on in his mind as he looks at the remains of the two young lives he has just terminated. It is not horror exactly, but it is not not horror, either. It is some kind of contemplation that is part of a stunned recognition that this is not the enemy he had expected. As he turns away, the camera sweeps over their bodies one more time as their children begin to cry and whimper in the next room.

Slightly later, Justin tells his superior, Patrick, that he "smoked Abrar...and his wife." When Patrick asks if she is still alive, Justin responds, "She's gonna bleed out," an obvious evasion. Why would Justin lie to Patrick about having executed Abrar's wife? Because he is ashamed? Because he can't reconcile himself to executing a woman in cold blood? Because he can't fully process the fact that the enemy looks like the beautiful young couple he "smoked"? Because, like the perpetrators of the attack on the World Trade Center, he has orphaned a room full of whimpering children? Because . . . he has become like the enemy in this war that is not a war—this feud? The film leads us to these questions. It does not answer them.

It does, however, suggest that the costs of this unprecedented war are themselves unprecedented. To make the torture scene "what the movie is about" is to refuse to watch the film, but instead to force it into some particular use. The torture scenes are a plot device. They establish an unfolding horror, an inevitable cruelty that flows through the feud/war toward



Maya's final moment in the airplane with the same inevitability that the car moved through the desert toward Jessica's doom. Alone in the vast belly of American technology, ready finally to leave Afghanistan, mission accomplished, Maya is dazed. When the pilot asks her where she wants to go, she is silent, unable to answer. The obvious response, as some friends suggested to me, is 'home', back to the Homeland she has thought of herself as defending. But she can't say it, arguably because it—home, the Homeland—no longer exists, at least not in the form she had pledged to defend. Her defense has destroyed it. She has become the image of a profound spiritual homelessness.

Then she begins to weep. Her tears, like Justin's stare, are in fact what the movie is 'about', not some simple minded notion of "getting bin Laden." The full power of Bigelow's art explodes here as Maya's silence and tears invoke the horror of a war that no one can name, even though they glibly call it the War on Terror, a war that no one understands, a war that strips the world of any illusion of value—a war that turns its own legitimizing staples ("honour" and "valour" ) into terrible ironies, drained of substance by too many euphemisms such as *collateral damage* whose goal is to mask the reality of the conflict. It is the horror of the recognition of the irreparable wound the war has inflicted on the nation's soul.

For Bigelow's critics, the film is completely defined by the fact that the interrogation of Ammar eventually yields a small piece of information that in the end leads Maya to bin Laden. This is a crucial move in their war on art, part of the drive to turn the film toward their own uses, to reduce it to an equivalence in an intellectual economy of equivalence. Whether or not torture works is irrelevant to a serious consideration of the film. The torture is the moment of infection, the first touch of the betrayal, the horror, which destroys America's soul precisely when it seems to succeed. It is the moment when the U.S. turns its back on its enduring thought of itself as a fortress of decency, human rights, integrity, and justice for all. The death of bin Laden, far from being a moment of triumph, is the moment of moral catastrophe.

It is understandable that John McCain and others would want to wage war on Bigelow's art. They are engaged in a rear guard action to hide its truths. Not simply the truth that horrible war crimes were committed under the direction of the highest levels of the US government, though that is certainly one goal of the smoke and mirror games they were playing with their outraged press conferences, noisy declarations of innocence, and faked Senate investigations. But it's the revelation of the moral collapse at the heart of Bigelow's film that truly terrifies them, whether they know it or not. That is art's power, to catch you up in its excessive sense even without your knowledge. If *The Hurt Locker* envisions how war brutalizes men's souls, *Zero Dark Thirty* ups the ante, envisioning how this war that is not a war has brutalized the soul of a nation, perhaps fatally, and that is not a revelation that the US wants circulated and acclaimed. Their attacks on Bigelow worked to the extent that the film was shunned by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and so denied the attention that comes with its recognition.

Why the radical/liberal cohort joined the government's war on art is a little more complicated. Given the anti-American politics that characterizes much of their public agenda, you would think they would be jubilant, given the film's brilliant and terrifying rendition of America's spiral into moral self-destruction. But they have no interest in being jolted into the excesses of

meaning that the film offers. They attack it ostensibly because of its content. The real problem, however, is the exuberant sense which refuses to settle into moralist categories; that in fact disrupts them, which opens the horizon toward the world beyond what we already know. Antithetical machines erected on oedipal obsessions will not yield to any embrace, especially not with the mystery at the heart of art. Add to that a justice fixation that is equated with virtue (part of a society of general equivalence) and an enmity toward the thought of beauty. In that context, the sheer excess of art is a threat to their control of a discourse organized around moral certainty in a world made up of binary oppositions. For them, art consists solely of codes waiting to be neatly deciphered in support of theoretical abstractions.

Unlike America's other wars, the war on art mostly does not announce itself. It doesn't have to. The horizon of subtraction assures a consistent universalizing equivalence that quite handily contains most excessive non-material aberrations. So what's the point? And if anything does escape that reduction, emergency containment options are ready. Whether they are dressed up as aggressive, political duplicity and manipulation or self-righteous, political virtue doesn't much matter. The goal is the same; to reassert the horizon, to reduce the "love carried by the film" to a plot device. The charge of propaganda is ironic because it operates within a campaign to singularize significance, to reduce perception of the film to a controlled response—outrage over torture. Moralisms are almost always at work in these operations, but don't necessarily drive them. They are more likely to show up infesting the shadows of some anxiety about ruptured thought and the world it opens. That opening is the threat at the heart of the war on art, the source of the various skirmishes and battles waged to contain it. Moral outrage is a cover. A film like Bigelow's is dangerous because it seriously challenges the limits of the horizon—and not quietly in some small, arcane gallery in an obscure corner of the city, but on thousands of screens around the world.

## Notes

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy: *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*. ( NY: Fordham UP, 2013) p.86.
- 2 *Hollywood Reporter*, 12 January 2013.
- 3 Marjorie Cohn, "Zero Dark Thirty: Torturing the facts." *Huffington Post*, 11 January 2013. Web
- 4 Ramzi Kassem, "The Zero Dark Thirty Controversy." *Huffington Post*, 15 January 2013. Web
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, "Zero Dark Thirty: Hollywood's gift to American power." *The Guardian*, 25 January 2013. Web
- 6 Naomi Wolf, "A letter to Kathryn Bigelow on Zero Dark Thirty's apology for torture." *The Guardian*, 14 January 2013.
- 7 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* Enlarged Edition. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979) p. 133.
- 8 Nancy, *op. cit.* p. 52.
- 9 Elmore Leonard: *La Brava*. (NY: HarperCollins, 2009 [1983]), p. 142. It is an interesting moment in Leonard's pulp fiction novel where the discussion of the main character's photographic art suddenly slips its bounds and begins to refer to the work of the novel itself, undermining any attempt to isolate art in contrast to the productions of popular culture. The implication is that art happens anywhere the work exceeds the circumstances of its occasion.
- 10 John Berger: *The Sense of Sight*. NY: Pantheon, 1985, p. 174.
- 11 Berger, *op. cit.* p. 191.
- 12 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit: *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*. (London: British Film Institute, 2008), p.8.
- 13 In *Act of Valor*, a film promoted for its so-called "realism," the war on terror is presented as a literal video game with first person shooter scenes in which a troop of "real" Navy Seals mow down everything that moves in order to save America from an insidious terrorist threat.
- 14 Bersani and Dutoit, *op. cit.* p. 1.
- 15 Žižek, *op. cit.*





# Framing Death and Desire

## PAINTED PORTRAITS IN FILM NOIR

By STEVEN JACOBS AND LISA COLPAERT

Although stating that photography and film have destroyed the ritual context and the magical power of artworks, Walter Benjamin acknowledged that portraits particularly contained remnants of the aura. "It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography," Benjamin wrote. "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face."<sup>1</sup> This magical power of the portrait (as well as its relation to the dead noted by Benjamin) is also at stake in many Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, in which painted portraits play an important role in the plot or draw a lot of attention in the mise-en-scène. This fascination for portraits can be found in several genres but it is particularly striking in noir thrillers and gothic melodramas. The plots of these films often revolve around the supposedly mysterious and threatening qualities of these paintings, which are, apart from some patriarchal portraits, mostly portraits of women. This tallies with the origins of portrait painting in the Renaissance when male portraits had first and foremost a representational function, whereas *female portraits were often presented as allegories of Beauty*.<sup>2</sup> Unmistakably situated in this age-old tradition of the representation of the mysterious woman, portraits in gothic melodramas such as *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *Gaslight*

(George Cukor, 1945), and *Dragonwyck* (Josef L. Mankiewicz, 1946) among many others, depict matriarchal figures or female ancestors with whom the female protagonist identifies. This article, however, focuses on female portraits in noir thrillers, in which portraits depict the female protagonists themselves. These portraits stimulate the desire of the male characters who, like the spectators, become entranced by this mysterious and seductive woman in the portrait before they have even met her in real life. The painted portrait of the title character of Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) is undoubtedly the most famous example of this plot device.

In *Laura* and many other films, these portraits channel an unfulfilled desire for an unreachable woman. By means of these painted portraits, the stereotypical noir femme fatale is changed into an immobile, powerless and framed image. The painted portrait therefore fully answers to a key idea of feminist psychoanalytical film theory, which presented Hollywood cinema as a manipulative device that equates the perspective of the spectator (including that of the female spectator) with the male gaze.<sup>3</sup> The numerous painted women in noir thrillers reinforce this process in which the female character is put on display and subjected to the gaze of male characters. Portraying the *woman thus means immobilizing, controlling, possessing, incarcerating, or mortifying her*.<sup>4</sup> This process of subjection fails, however, since the portraits of women often imply a fatal threat to the male characters. This threat can take on different forms:



blackmail as in *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944), imprisonment as in *The Dark Corner* (Henry Hathaway, 1946), wrongful prosecution as in *Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), or madness as in *Experiment Perilous* (Jacques Tourneur, 1944), *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945), *The Locket* (John Brahm, 1946) and *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (Peter Godfrey, 1947). In any case, the painted portraits mesmerize their beholders. The seductive illusionism of the paintings seems to imply magical qualities. For the films' characters, the portrait is more than a mere representation. Often there is the suggestion that the painting contains the spirit or soul of the person portrayed – a primitive idea that Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz have called "effigy magic".<sup>5</sup>

This heightened appearance of painted portraits with poignant and sometimes magical properties has been an attractive motif for many filmmakers working in several eras, styles, and genres. However, film noir seems to have a peculiar fascination for painted portraits of women; in one of the first key texts on film noir, Raymond Durgnat mentioned their importance as one of many forms of doubling.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Janey Place wrote that "the framed portrait of a woman is a common motif in film noir."<sup>7</sup> Kent Minter, in addition, remarked that "art is a common gambit in the first cycle of film noirs. Comprising a significant subsection of these films are film noirs in which the femme fatale is also a painting. (...) These films play off the inherent duality of art – it is unclear if the woman in the portrait is an illusion (frequently oneiric), or real. The woman in the portrait remains elusive and unattainable throughout the duration of the film."<sup>8</sup> Referring to Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*, in which a painted portrait in a display window of an art gallery plays an important part, Foster Hirsch remarked that "yet all noir temptresses have the remoteness of a painting seen in a window. And to embody their dreamlike otherness, the actresses who impersonate them perform in a cryptic manner, sleepwalking through masculine nightmares."<sup>9</sup> Several scholars

have connected the noir fascination for portraits with its thematizing of alienation and subjectivity and its morbid fascination with abnormal psychology. To Susan Felleman, for instance, portraits, such the emblematic one in Preminger's *Laura*, are "not just a question of a return of the dead but rather a return of the repressed."<sup>10</sup> Other authors have noted that, as a framing device, the painted portrait perfectly fits into film noir with its bizarre, off-angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame. In their 1974 key article on visual motifs in film noir, Janey Place and Lowell Peterson mention that "framed portraits and mirror reflections, beyond their symbolic representations of fragmented ego or idealized image, sometimes assume ominous and foreboding quality solely because they are so compositionally present."<sup>11</sup>

Strikingly, the hypnotic powers of these portraits are based on photographic and cinematic qualities rather than pictorial ones. From a perspective outside the diegesis, many painted portraits featured in these films were actually retouched photographs. The famous portrait in *Laura*, for instance, was an enlarged photograph that was lightly brushed with paint to give it the appearance of an oil painting.<sup>12</sup> No doubt, this was also the case with many of the other "oils" in frames that are featured in film noir. In addition, the mesmerizing power of these portraits is also based on the confrontation between the still image of the portrait and the dynamic film medium. In an article on the painting featured in Tourneur's *Experiment Perilous*, Thomas Elsaesser linked this static quality to an enigmatic power that mesmerizes the obsessed characters.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, the powerful impact of the pictorial image is first and foremost the result of the tricks of the film trade. Supported by dramatic music, forward tracking shots suggest an intimate contact between portrait and beholder. Specific shot compositions present the portrait as a character on par with the others. For instance, when several characters gather around a painting or when a portrait looms over the shoulder of one of the char-



*Woman in the Window*





acters as a guardian angel or a tormenting evil spirit. Furthermore, camera positions and camera movements correspond with conventional shot/reverse shot patterns, implying that the portrait is looking back at the beholder. This is also achieved by a perfect integration of the direction of the painted figure's gaze in a system of eyeline matches—this feature can also help explain why the vast majority of artworks featured in films are portraits. Film theorists such as Béla Balázs and Jacques Aumont have argued that the human face is the preeminent motif in cinema.<sup>14</sup> It shares the expressive powers of faces in other artistic media but it is also a structural element in the process of character identification and, through the system of eyeline matches, in the linking of separate shots through editing.

Additionally, other cinematic devices also bring the portrait to life in film. Low-key lighting often skillfully animates the static portrait, resulting in the chiaroscuro typical of film noir. By lighting certain areas of the painted surface and obscuring other parts, the person portrayed seems to get disconnected from the background. In *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, the painting is seen during a nocturnal thunderstorm and brought to life by lightning and the reflection of raindrops on the window. In *The Dark Corner*, another theatrical device is put to good use when the painting is unveiled by pulling away a curtain. Sound effects, such as swelling music or the voice-over of a deceased person, contribute to the dynamics of the static portrait. All of these cinematic elements—mise-en-scène, specific narrative situations, shot compositions, camera movement, editing, lighting and sound effects—have to make clear that the illusionist effect of the painting on its beholders is powerful and often fatal. The realism of the portraits seems to entail a confusion

between the image and its referent, a topic skillfully mastered in Lang's *Woman in the Window*, in which the encounters (one in broad daylight, another at night) between male protagonist, painting, and female model is turned into a superb play of optical reflections and interactions. In the nocturnal scene, the model's reflection appears in the window, superimposed over the portrait, creating a dream-like image of the mysterious woman. This confusion between image and its referent reminds one of famous artist anecdotes from classical antiquity that describe masterpieces capable of misleading humans and animals. In one of the most famous artist legends, mentioned in the *Naturalis Historia* by Pliny the Elder, Zeuxis succeeded in misleading the birds with his painted grapes but he himself was misled by Parrhasius, who painted a curtain that his rival took to be real.

Similarly, the male protagonists of films noirs often confuse the real woman with her painted representation. Men fall completely under the spell of the portraits, which not only resemble the person portrayed, but are also uncanny because most of the portraits are associated with death. In noir thrillers and melodramas, a painted portrait usually depicts a deceased person or it announces the death of the person portrayed or that of the male spectator obsessed by it. Often, as in *Phantom Lady*, *Whirlpool* (Otto Preminger, 1949) and *Laura*, the lifeless body and the portrait of the deceased are explicitly visualized together or the dialogue refers to the fact that the corpse of the woman was found under her painted portrait. In *The Crimson Kimono* (Samuel Fuller, 1959), both model and the painting are hit by a bullet.

As a result, these painted portraits mysteriously enable the



communication between the dead and the living.<sup>15</sup> Through this explicit connection to death, these paintings take the portrait genre back to its origins, the death mask. As Cynthia Freeland has noted, "portraiture in general is thought to have originated from the desire to preserve likenesses of the dead, both to assure them of a kind of ongoing life and to enable us to maintain contact with them."<sup>16</sup> In the dynamic and temporal medium of film, this aspect acquires a new dimension. Stopping life, the portrait is now mobilized again. This, of course, makes the cinematic exploration of painted portraits highly attractive. Ironically, in the same years as the portraits discussed in this article, André Bazin wrote his famous essay on the ontology of the photographic (film) image, in which he linked the indexical nature of photography and film to the mummy and the death mask.<sup>17</sup>

Noir's association of painted portraits and death was, no doubt, also inspired by famous literary precedents such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Oval Portrait* (1842) or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In the first part of *The Oval Portrait*, a nocturnal visitor falls under the spell of the liveliness of a painted portrait. While Poe's tale further deals with the story of the painter and his wife, several noir films rather focus on the burning and impossible desire of the viewers to meet the portrayed woman in the flesh. In *The Dark Corner*, for instance, the male protagonist falls hopelessly in love with a woman in a painting made centuries earlier. Other films suggest that the encounter with the portrayed woman takes place in a dream or nightmare. In *Laura*, the title character only appears when the male protagonist has fallen asleep under her portrait. In Lang's *The Woman in the Window*, it turns out that the encounter with the woman was part of a dream. In such scenarios, the woman herself eventually becomes irrelevant and subordinate to her painted portrait. This perverse or fetishist aspect was particularly developed in *Laura*, which deals with a necrophiliac relationship between the male protagonist and the portrait of a dead woman who turns out to still be alive in the end—a plot structure also present in *The Unsuspected* (Michael Curtiz, 1947). Also in other films, portrayed women are in suspended animation, as it were, when it turns out that the model shows a mysterious resemblance to an unknown woman from the past as in *The Dark Corner* or simply does not exist as in *Strangers in the Night* (Anthony Mann, 1944). In such plot structures, an allegedly dead woman 'magically' comes back to life.

The second part of Poe's *The Oval Portrait* is about an artist who is obsessed by his painting to the extent that he completely neglects his wife, who is also his model. When the artist eventually succeeds in bringing the portrait to life, his wife turns out to be dead. Some films in which the painted image implies a threat to the woman seem to copy this narrative structure. Poe's plot was almost literally appropriated in Peter Godfrey's *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, in which Humphrey Bogart plays the role of tormented artist Geoffrey Carroll. Both the first and second wife of Carroll are in mortal danger after he has finished their portraits. As with Poe's painter, Carroll's act of finishing a masterpiece coincides with the death of his wife. In order to turn a particular painting into a masterpiece, he has to extract the life out of his model. Similar to the observer of the portrait in Poe's story "[who] had mistaken the head [of the portrait] for that of a living person", the spectators of Carroll's portraits shiver and find the painting "a bit creepy". However, the shock it induces is not the same as the one described in *The Oval Portrait*. While the painting in Poe's story strikes the spectator due to its liveliness,

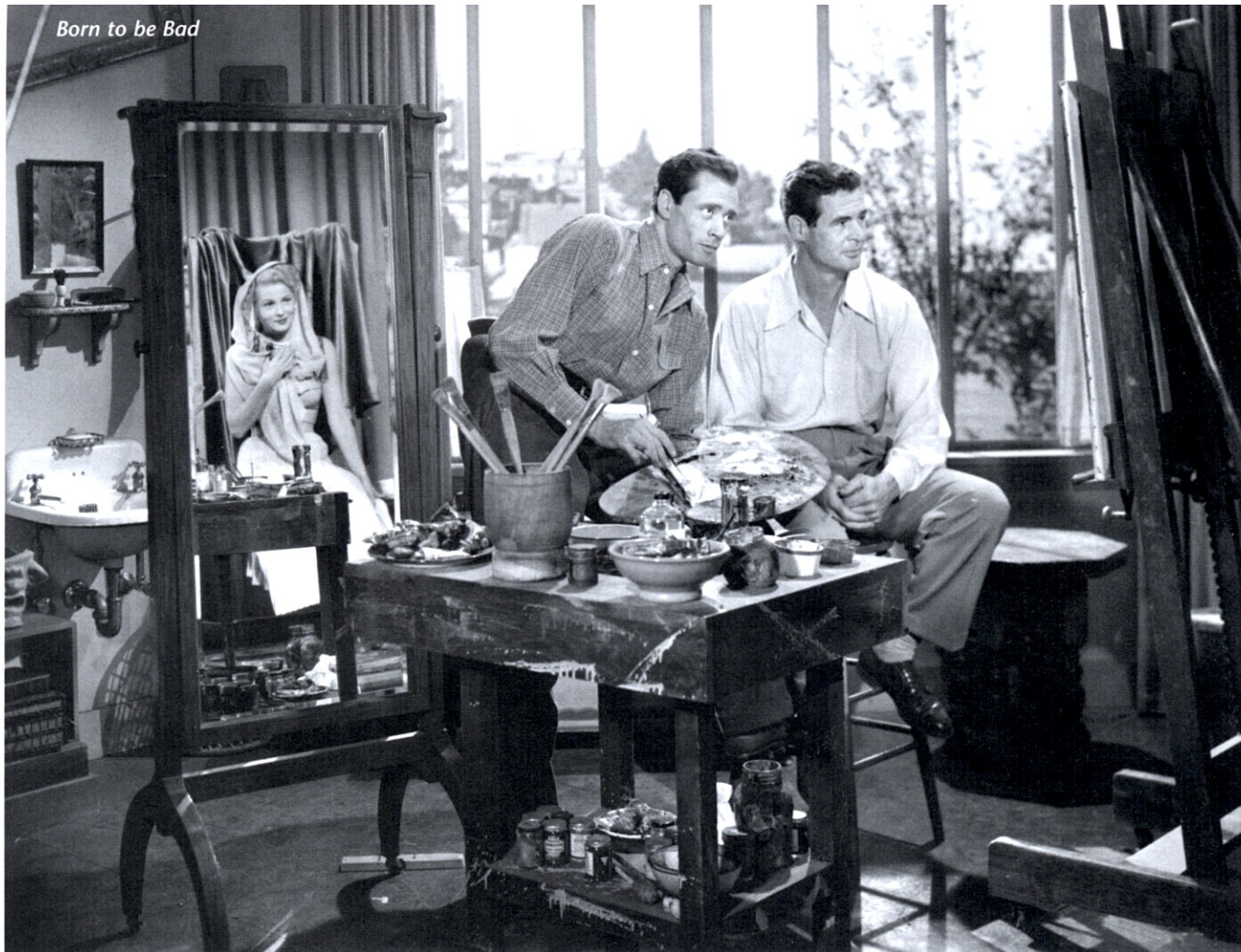
Carroll's portraits are marked by death and decay. In a similar way, the desired woman in *Experiment Perilous* has become a prisoner of her husband, who has compelled her to mimic her painted image. In both *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* and *Experiment Perilous*, as well as in many other films, a woman's life is threatened by the doubling of her image by means of a portrait.

The plot structure of several films is also reminiscent of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, which was adapted for the screen in 1945 by Albert Lewin in a noirish style. The story of a portrait getting old while the person portrayed remains forever young unmistakably resonates in a key scene in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, in which the female protagonist discovers her image in a condition of decay in the secluded studio of her artist husband. In *The Unsuspected*, the artist reveals that it is not the woman but her portrait that has changed when she turns out to be alive. In *The Dark Corner*, an eccentric art collector tells his young wife who resembles a sixteenth-century portrait: "I never want you to grow up. You should remain ageless, like a Madonna, who lives and breathes and smiles, and belongs to me." In other words, he wishes to keep his wife forever young, just like the woman on the painting.

A painted portrait also implies that an artist has been involved. In most films, however, the (fictitious) artist is unknown and irrelevant to the story, which focuses on the relation between the painted portrait and its owners or beholders. Nonetheless, noir crime thrillers and melodramas are inhabited by quite a collection of artist characters. Films in which the artist is a major character are usually marked by specific narratives and plot devices. A recurrent important theme, for instance, is the relationship between the artist and his model, which connects the portrait to the theme of (unfulfilled) desire. In *Laura* and *The Unsuspected*, the portraits were made by promising young artists while having a love affair with their models. In *Scarlet Street*, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, and *The Locket*, the artist falls hopelessly for his model to the point of insanity. In these films, the artist is presented as a frustrated Pygmalion. He desperately tries to mold his beloved according to an ideal image and sometimes he is no longer capable of distinguishing the original from its representation. Interestingly, in films such as *Laura*, *The Dark Corner* and *Experiment Perilous*, in which the artist has a minor role or is absent, the Pygmalion figure is embodied by another character—a patriarch who, at any cost, tries to determine in what way a woman should dress, how she should behave and who she is allowed to meet. These Pygmalion figures are old, rich and sophisticated, qualities that suggest or explain their sexual impotence, success among women and their interest in art respectively. In each case, they feel threatened by a younger man, who longs for the love of the heroine and who is seduced by her painted portrait.

Apart from the fact that the role of the Pygmalion figure is sometimes played by another character, it is usually the artist who attempts to gain control over both his artwork and model. In Lang's *Scarlet Street*, the identification between artist and model is even complete. When art dealers and critics get interested in the amateur painter's works, his mistress claims that she painted them—something to which the artist responds with delight because he wants to keep their relation secret to his wife. As a result, the portrait of the mistress is presented as her self-portrait and the fatal plot of the film is largely built on the exchange of identities between both protagonists. In the end, the artist kills his model, and hence his own artistic calling, while the portrait keeps haunting him. In *Bluebeard* (Edgar G.





Ulmer, 1944) and *The Two Mrs. Carralls*, John Carradine and Humphrey Bogart respectively play the role of painters who both create and destroy. Like the painter in Poe's *The Oval Portrait*, the finishing of their masterpieces coincides with the death of their models. It was, therefore, no coincidence that critics complimented the work of the painter in *Bluebeard* by stating that "his flesh tones are superb." This obstinate link between insanity, murder and the process of artistic creation also tallies with the age-old tradition of artist legends and anecdotes, which have been charted by scholars such as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, Griselda Pollock and Catherine Soussloff among others.<sup>18</sup> In feature films, too, the artist is invariably presented as a lonesome and misunderstood genius. He or she is an eccentric rebel who rejects artistic conventions but also lives a life of poverty, alcohol, pangs of love, venereal disease, crime, self-destruction, insanity and suicide.<sup>19</sup>

The vast majority of painted portraits featured in noir thrillers and melodramas are executed in a conventional realist style. For Garrett Stewart, the mediocre and saccharine hyper-realism or failed classicism of these portraits is functional. "Like the stalled and emptied female figure such portraits predominantly represent, the ontological void of this art makes cinema necessary both as fuller illusionistic system and, most of all, as temporal narrative."<sup>20</sup> As mentioned before, many if not most painted portraits that play an important part in a film are present without the artists that created them. However, when the artist actually is a film character, his art is strikingly modernist. Films such as *The Big Clock* (John Farrow, 1948), *Bluebeard*, *Born to Be Bad* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), *Guest in the House* (John Brahm,

1944), *The Locket*, *The Man in the Net* (Michael Curtiz, 1959), *Scarlet Street* and *The Two Mrs Carralls* feature artist characters who paint portraits that, in contrast with the country-club realism of the portraits in other films, are marked by a wide variety of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century non-naturalist styles ranging from impressionism, fauvism, expressionism and cubism to surrealism.

Strikingly, these modern styles contribute to the uncanny qualities of these portraits and most of them are in one way or another linked to the insanity of the painter or the model. These films can therefore be seen as part of a populist discourse, which condemned modern art as childish, insane and ugly – to use the phrasing of a famous article by Diane Waldman on modern art in 1940s Hollywood films.<sup>21</sup> According to Waldman, popular films in the 1940s regarded modern art with hostility and suspicion. To a certain extent, Waldman's analysis applies to film noir. In films such as *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), *Illegal* (Lewis Allen, 1955), *New York Confidential* (Russell Rouse, 1955), *T-Men* (Anthony Mann, 1947), and *The Unsuspected*, modern art decorates the interiors of gangster bosses, corrupt lawyers, racketeers or murderers. In her oft-quoted article, Waldman also notes that in 1940s films portraiture is often used as a political tool against modernism. Given this perspective, the presence of a realistic portrait, which emphasizes individualism and naturalism, was used as an occasion to validate the illusionist aesthetic over modern art, for the latter was characterized as dangerous and associated with the mentally ill.

In *The Locket*, for instance, the madness of the model, who





turns out to be a pathological kleptomaniac, is transferred to the painter Norman Clyde /Robert Mitchum. In *Phantom Lady*, Jack Marlow /Franchot Tone is a prototypical insane modern artist, who sculpts artworks reminiscent of European expressionists such as Käthe Kollwitz and Ernst Barlach. His psychotic madness is indicated by his migraine headaches and overdone hand gestures. Fascinated by his own creative hands, Marlow continuously touches his sculptures, one of them representing a pair of hands. In *The Big Clock*, too, the expressionist motif of a pair of hands is present in a painting by artist Louise Patterson /Elsa Lanchester. The expressionist painting is an important clue in a murder case and indicates the artist's madness. Insane modern artists are often also characterized as being murderous. Their insanity is incited by the creation of a masterpiece, the portrait of a beloved they'll eventually want to kill, as for example in *Scarlet Street*, *The Two Mrs. Carralls*, and *Bluebeard*. As in Poe's *The Oval Portrait*, the creativity of the artists in these films is linked to the killing of their beloved models.

Although modern art is often associated with insanity or ridiculed in films of the 1940s, the situation is much more complex than authors such as Waldman have suggested. On the one hand, modern artists are not always presented as unsympathetic characters. Even the tormented and psychologically disturbed artists in *Scarlet Street* and *The Locket* are characters with whom the audience identifies. On the other hand, the world of traditional bourgeois art is also often ridiculed or, as *Laura*, *The Woman in the Window*, *The Unsuspected* or *Phantom Lady* demonstrate, also associated with decadence, death and murder. Antique dealers or art collectors in general, such as

those in *The Big Combo* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1955), *The Dark Corner* or *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955) are usually questionable characters. In *The Dark Corner* and *Crack-Up* (Irving Reis, 1946), the art world itself is presented as a realm corrupted by forgery, blackmail and murder. Fraud and art forgery, of course, also play an important part in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), which is usually considered to be one of the first instances of film noir. In short, all art, both modern and traditional, is associated with crime and snobbery but it is usually modern art that designates insanity.

Hollywood's anti-modernist stance was self-consciously dealt with in *The Big Knife* (Robert Aldrich, 1955) by means of a painting by Georges Rouault, which is often framed while looming behind one of the characters. In Aldrich's film, Rouault's *Pierrot* (1920) adorns the modern Bel Air mansion of movie star Charles Castle /Jack Palance. The painting once belonged to the extensive art collection of Castle's wife, Marion/Ida Lupino. Given that Marion has left him, the painting, like many of the portraits discussed in this article, marks the presence of an important absentee. A strange object in the Hollywood star's mansion, the painting also comments on Hollywood's hostility toward modern art. The Rouault painting, for instance, is introduced when a gossip columnist observes it and cannot hide her contempt for it as she asks "French paintings? Don't you buy Americans anymore?" Clearly aware of Hollywood's rejection of European modernism, Castle doesn't want the columnist to mention his wife's art collection in her article since he doesn't want the public to think he went all "arty". In addition, when a studio executive talks about his suicidal and alcoholic wife, her



"mad" identity is linked to the Pierrot portrait. Later in the story, however, Castle identifies with the Rouault picture. The identification is made complete when Marion looks at the Rouault painting after Castle's suicide. Rather than criticizing modern art, a maverick director like Aldrich uses it to criticize Hollywood.

It is striking that in both *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* and *Phantom Lady*, insanity and suicide are explicitly associated with Vincent van Gogh. In *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, Carroll's mental disorder becomes manifest when his daughter, Beatrice, reads about van Gogh and states that it was sad that he was "so brilliant and yet he went insane"—a statement that makes Carroll furious. In *Phantom Lady*, Marlow is associated with a van Gogh self-portrait with bandaged ear (painted in 1889) as he commits suicide by throwing himself through a window. Van Gogh had become especially popular in the 1940s and 1950s. The melodramatic aspects of van Gogh's life had already been the focus of both a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 and of the fictionalized biography *Lust for Life* (1934) by Irving Stone, which was the basis for the eponymous 1956 film by Vincente Minnelli. As Griselda Pollock has demonstrated, van Gogh had become the paradigm of the bourgeois prototype of the mad genius through an overexploitation and romanticization of biographical facts.<sup>22</sup> When the "van Gogh persona of the modern artist" was revitalized and popularized in film noir, the post-impressionist painter had also become an important reference point for a generation of abstract-expressionist artists.<sup>23</sup> With his self-portraits and nervous brush strokes, van Gogh became the prototype of the artist who is present in his own work. The brushstroke as a registration of both bodily and psychological urges of the painter was also highly cultivated in the action painting of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. Heavily marked by existentialism, the art discourse of the 1940s and 1950s presented the abstract artwork as psychological portrait of the artist—Pollock's drippings were compared to the ink blobs of the Rorschach tests that also became popular in that era. This notion of the abstract image as a psychological footprint tallies with the observation, made here earlier, that the presence of an artist in film is usually connected to an unconventional, modern or non-naturalist style. Consequently, it seems that for Hollywood filmmakers, the portrait does not only tell us something about the person portrayed but also about the psyche of the artist who made the portrait.

The modernity of the artworks is, however, never radical. Abstract expressionism itself is strikingly absent in film noir although its predilection for German-inspired diagonal framings and distorted perspectives has been linked with some of the characteristics of action painting.<sup>24</sup> Only Sam Fuller's *The Crimson Kimono*, not coincidentally a late instance of film noir, has, as a minor character, a female action painter who throws beer at her canvas. In film noir, modern artists usually paint in a non-naturalist but still representational (and not abstract) style marked by Cubism, Expressionism or Surrealism. These non-naturalist styles are often invoked in order to emphasize the enchanting qualities of the portraits. Their enigmatic nature is further stressed by a non-illusionist but also emphatically anti-dynamic—i.e. uncinematic—style referring to modernist currents such as Symbolism, Surrealism and Magical Realism. In the painted portraits that feature in *Scarlet Street* and *The Locket*, for instance, female characters are presented as petrified figures, or fossilized icons, that emphasize the lifeless nature of the portraits and thus break the narrative and optical dynamics of the film. Instead of deconstructing the portrait genre, these

modernist styles are thus rather used to emphasize the uncanny character as well as the affective powers of these portraits. Whereas the conventional portraits in films such as *Laura*, *The Unsuspected*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Phantom Lady* or *Experiment Perilous* first and foremost evoke the mesmerizing (and sometimes deceitful) beauty of the sitters, the modern paintings in *Scarlet Street*, *The Locket*, *Born to Be Bad* or *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* are immediately ominous. In film noir, also modernist portraits are magical and they, too, offer a last refuge for what Benjamin called "the cult value of the picture."

## Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 228.
- 2 See Shearer West, *Portraiture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 150.
- 3 See Laura Mulvey's famous article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Sue Thornham (ed.) *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1999), 58-69. See also Mary Ann Doane's *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film in the 1940s* (London: Macmillan, 1988); and Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1988).
- 4 Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 47-68.
- 5 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 73-79.
- 6 Raymond Durnat, "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir" (1970), in Alain Silver & James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 47.
- 7 Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 58.
- 8 Kent Minturn, "Peinture Noire: Abstract Expressionism and Film Noir," in Alain Silver & James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir Reader 2* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 288.
- 9 Foster Hirsch, *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* (New York: Da Capo, 1981), 157.
- 10 Susan Felleman, "The Moving Picture Gallery," *Iris* 14/15 (Autumn 1992), 194.
- 11 Janey Place & Lowell Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," in Alain Silver & James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 68.
- 12 William Hare, *Early Film Noir: Greed, Lust, and Murder Hollywood Style* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 114.
- 13 Thomas Elsaesser, "Mirror, Muse, Medusa: Experiment Perilous," *Iris* 14-15 (Autumn 1992), 147-48.
- 14 Béla Balazs, "The Face of Man," in *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 52-88; Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma* (Paris: Editions de l'étoile, 1992).
- 15 See Susan Felleman, *Art and the Cinematic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 21-24.
- 16 Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46.
- 17 See André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique" (1945), in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2007), 9-17. See also Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 54-66.
- 18 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Griselda Pollock, "Artists Mythologies and Media Genius: Madness and Art History," *Screen*, XXI, 3 (1980), 57-96; Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn. The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).
- 19 See Steven Jacobs, "Vasari in Hollywood: Artists and Biopics," in *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 38-64.
- 20 Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo-Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 344.
- 21 See Diane Waldman, "The Childish, the Insane, and the Ugly: The Representation of Modern Art in Popular Film and Fiction in the Forties," *Wide Angle* 5, 2 (1982), 52-65.
- 22 Griselda Pollock, "Artists Mythologies and Media Genius: Madness and Art History," *Screen*, XXI, 3 (1980), 57-96.
- 23 Kent Minturn, op.cit., 284.
- 24 Ibid., 271-309.



# Concerning the Spiritual in Art

## MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION AND THE LANGUAGE OF EXPRESSIONIST PAINTING

By VICTORIA L. EVANS

The exaggerated artifice of Douglas Sirk's major melodramas has often been remarked upon, but it has yet to be interpreted in the light of his detailed cognizance of the major art and architectural movements of the period.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that this director's ongoing fascination with modernist painting was first disclosed in a series of interviews that took place more than three decades ago, the influence of the theories of the German Expressionists upon his non-mimetic use of colour and composition has yet to be explored. When a sophisticated German expatriate reveals that in his university days he was "1/2 literary, 1/2 a painter", then perhaps it is time that the second portion of this statement be taken more seriously.<sup>2</sup> To my mind, there seems little doubt that this director's non-naturalistic formal approach has been deeply influenced by contemporary experiments in the visual arts. In other words, I would argue that Sirk rarely chose to manipulate his rich palette of intensely saturated colours simply to estrange the audience from the depicted storyline or just for decorative effect.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he tended to use particular hues that were already freighted with a pre-existing symbolic meaning in order to underscore the central themes of the narrative. Since in Sirk's cinematic version of *Magnificent Obsession* it is an Expressionist painter who initiates Bob Merrick into the cryptic philosophy that will change the course of his

life, in this paper I will attempt to re-examine this infamous film through the prism of the writings of Wassily Kandinsky.

In the first of the director's two projects starring the celebrated Hollywood actress Jane Wyman, Rock Hudson was cast as the spoiled playboy who is inadvertently responsible for both a self-sacrificing doctor's death and his widow's subsequent blindness. These thoughtless deeds will eventually be redeemed once Merrick has completed his medical training and performed the operation that restores Helen Phillips' sight. It is important to note, however, that this character's whole moral regeneration turns upon what he has learned in a chance encounter with an enigmatic painter called Edward Randolph. Merrick decides to follow Randolph's advice, and only then discovers that an unwavering dedication to helping others also enables him to tap into some powerful transcendental force. Moreover, the glimmerings of spirituality that this rather mystical artist reveals are so important that they were explicitly acknowledged in several of the memos that were produced by the studio's publicity department just before the film's release. According to the anonymous author of one of these documents, the removal of the "stilted comedy situations" that had been included in John Stahl's previous adaptation of the Lloyd C. Douglas novel shifts the focus of the 1954 re-make back to the central drama, thus rendering Merrick's spiritual journey more credible.<sup>4</sup> In an additional unpublished typescript David Weiss predicts that the new version of *Magnificent Obsession* will be prove to be as "phenomenally successful" as *The Robe* (a slightly earlier film based on a Lloyd C. Douglas book), due to the "great revival of religious feeling in the United States today".<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless the kind of ineffable spirituality that this fascinating melodrama implies bears little resemblance to the orthodox Christianity that Weiss claims many Americans now share, starting with "Eisenhower and going down into the hearts of millions". Hence, it is my belief that Sirk's "exalted" film is drawing upon the same sort of nontraditional religious sources that inspired some of the most groundbreaking innovations in early twentieth-century European art.<sup>6</sup>

As the best-selling novel that *Magnificent Obsession* was adapted from makes clear, the mystical convictions that pervade this popular 1954 release were loosely based upon theosophy (a late nineteenth-century attempt to create a universal religion that borrowed its most fundamental precepts from both East and West).<sup>7</sup> The main teachings of Christianity are not excluded from this alternative metaphysical system (as Randolph says in the film, "one of the first men to [adopt this







way of life] went to the cross at the age of thirty-three"), but they have been supplemented by a series of ideas that were taken from Buddhism and Brahmanism. Among these was the notion of karma ("the sum of a person's bodily, mental and spiritual growth, often accumulated during numerous incarnations"), which assumes that the benevolent acts that a person carries out in one lifetime will enable him or her to evolve into a more spiritually enlightened being in the next.<sup>8</sup> Within the context of *Magnificent Obsession*, Dr. Wayne Phillips' mysterious compulsion to assist anyone who is in need and to refuse any form of material recompense because he had already been "paid" in full makes sense, when it is viewed from this perspective. Edward Randolph's warning to Merrick that "investing

one's life in [helping] others" means aligning "one's self" with the cosmic "forces [that are] leading [the soul] up and on" is also consistent with this occult model of a gradually ascending progress. Moreover, theosophists believe that everything that exists in the material world is conjoined by a single, transcendent current (so that in essence, every living being is animated by a portion of the same Divine pneuma). Again, in perhaps the most pivotal scene in Sirk's cinematic realization of Lloyd C. Douglas's original story, Edward Randolph describes this celestial emanation as a sort of "electricity" being emitted by an inexhaustible "powerhouse" that anyone can choose to tap into, a conception that is totally in keeping with this much less sectarian religious faith.



Therefore, when Jean-Loup Bourget lists a few of the many instances in which the "gaudy mysticism" of *Magnificent Obsession* deviates from traditional Christianity, I would argue that most of these observations are beside the point.<sup>9</sup> Within this film's theosophical framework, the physical and temporal distinctions that separate Dr. Phillips (the eminent surgeon) from Bob Merrick (the reformed playboy) from Edward Randolph (the visionary painter) from Jesus Christ (the murdered prophet) are utterly inconsequential.<sup>10</sup> If "Christ was only 'one' among several who achieved infinite power through philanthropy", then this is because a spark of God's eternal light illuminates the soul of every living creature, a soul that may be so perfected by performing acts of kindness that it eventually merges with the Absolute. Bob Merrick will become "everything that Wayne Phillips was" only after he has learned how to harness the Divine afflatus that they both encapsulate and that connects them to the rest of humanity.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Bourget and Sirk have both noted, when Randolph hovers overhead during the climactic operation in which Bob Merrick restores his beloved's sight, the painter appears to be acting in a much greater capacity than just a spiritual adviser and moral conscience.<sup>12</sup> As a celestial choir intones a cascading series of notes that wordlessly evoke Beethoven's "Song of Joy", the iconography of this sequence seems to align the artist's elevated figure with God himself. Yet given the boundlessness of the cosmology that has already been sketched out, I would argue that Randolph's image should not be read as a straightforward personification of the Almighty in the manner of a baroque painting as Jean-Loup Bourget has suggested.<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with the repeated mention of electricity as a metaphor for the sacred in this film, theosophists no longer conceived of the Supreme Being as an imposing grey-haired man with a beard, but rather as an infinite, supra-natural force that courses through the whole of Creation.<sup>14</sup> Madame Blavatsky, the Russian co-founder of the Theosophical Society, had in fact specifically criticized the Judeo-Christian tendency to anthropomorphize this undifferentiated "Universal Soul" into the figure of Jehovah.<sup>15</sup> In her opinion, the indeterminacy of the supernal world can only be represented by a more incorporeal substance that is capable of penetrating everywhere, such as "breath" or "light" which in Sirk's film has coalesced into the notion of electrical flow.<sup>16</sup> Hence, during the shot/reverse shot exchange in which Randolph looks down onto the operating room from above, I would suggest that he should not be interpreted as a straightforward "symbolic substitute" for this genuinely "incognizable Deity" to adopt Madame Blavatsky's terminology.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the artist should be viewed as simply providing a conduit for channeling more of this ineffable energy towards his friend. Since Randolph walks out of the frame almost as soon as Helen's operation has begun, it only succeeds in the end because Bob Merrick has learned how to draw additional spiritual voltage from the same transcendent source as his mentor.<sup>18</sup> In other words, making "contact" with the divine has "unlocked" the frivolous playboy's latent abilities and enabled him to fulfill his true "destiny" of becoming an accomplished surgeon.

As *Magnificent Obsession* reveals, anyone can benefit from an additional influx of this generative force, which may be used to fuel scientific invention (as in this instance) or artistic creation (in the case of Edward Randolph). While this theosophical doctrine may seem "crazy" from a rational point of view, it is no more so than the major tenets of many other religions (includ-

ing Christianity). Indeed, the director used the same pejorative adjective to describe Shakespeare's Hamlet and Periclean drama in a 1977 interview with Michael Stern, since these canonical works were just as riddled with ad hoc coincidences and constrained by external commercial and social concerns as his films.<sup>19</sup> Yet if their non-naturalistic qualities did not prevent these plays from being considered enduring masterpieces, why should *Magnificent Obsession* be treated any differently? Again according to the director, even the most popular genre can be transformed into art when it has been infused with "style,...signs and meaning", and his version of Lloyd C. Douglas's story does manage to capture something of the novel's numinous faith. Unlike many of his subsequent critics, in this interview Sirk urges us to take the film's melodramatic denouement completely seriously, asserting that "down there on the operating table, a miracle really is happening".<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, according to Edward Randolph's account of his own halting aesthetic development, it is precisely this kernel of spirituality that legitimizes certain strands of contemporary art. He would soon discover that "making fairly adequate copies of the Masters" was not enough, nor was engaging in empty formal innovation for its own sake. In order to become a real artist, Randolph (guided by Wayne Phillips) had to learn to create new works that were suffused with the same transcendent force as those of his most illustrious predecessors. Hence, Sirk's presiding visionary is no longer the sculptor who appears in the book and in the first film adaptation of this narrative but a painter, whose attenuated images are more in keeping with Theosophy's dematerialized conception of the Divine. The formlessness of this supersensible realm (apprehended by clairvoyants as a fluctuating field of colored light and musical tones) is echoed in the turbulent background of Randolph's canvasses, although he has not yet dispensed with physical matter entirely.<sup>21</sup> In fact, what the two most clearly observable pictures in the artist's studio seem to represent is the moment when the soul trembles on the verge of leaving the body, before returning to a state of pure energy.

According to the theories of Madame Blavatsky, Randolph's painting of a gaunt, crucified Christ would have signified the destruction of "the man of flesh and his passions" that preceded being "reborn as an Immortal".<sup>22</sup> The other composition, featuring a group of flickering, angular figures moving towards a brilliant white vortex of light, also suggests an incipient passage to a more spiritual plane. To a theosophist, this striking iconography would no doubt have evoked the "one white ray" that symbolized the eternal truth of the "Universal Mind", which was said to unite "the seven prismatic aspects of color", the earth with the heavens, and the principle religions of East and West.<sup>23</sup> Yet these figurative images are emblems of transition rather than resolution, because no mortal being (however sensitive) can advance beyond this threshold without first discarding the "enwrapping veil" of his or her corporeality.<sup>24</sup> Although artists could show others "the way...to the newly awakened spiritual life" by illustrating its intangible surroundings, even their perception of this supernal realm was incomplete and the heightened level of consciousness that it required could only be sustained intermittently.<sup>25</sup>

As Jean-Loup Bourget has already emphasized, *Magnificent Obsession's* hazy mysticism places its audience in the uneasy position of struggling to see "through the glass darkly". Given the theosophical cosmology that the film has established, however, I would dispute his conclusion that the spectator's faint,



somewhat distorted perception of the Absolute should be read as an indication that "God is Dead".<sup>26</sup> To my mind, it simply means that the imperfections of the flesh inevitably impair our ability to grasp the true nature of what is essentially a purely spiritual phenomenon. In other words, the blindness that results from Helen Phillip's tragic accident is symptomatic of a much more generalized human condition. By the end of Sirk's version of Lloyd C. Douglas's story, raising the spectator's awareness of his or her limited capacity to see and to understand this higher reality seems to have become the main objective of the *mise-en-scène*, despite the accompanying narrative of love and redemption.

In particular, the audience is only allowed to observe Sirk's "miracle" taking place indirectly, by watching the mirror image of Helen's life-saving operation that is visible on the overhead window. After showing us the surgeon's first few decisive gestures, the camera then tracks forward past the actors, tilts up and focuses exclusively on this translucent screen. At first, the spectral reflection of the doctors at work on their patient frames the upper portion of Edward Randolph's equally insubstantial form (since he monitors their progress from behind the same layer of glass). Even after the artist has gone, our view of the surgical procedure that restores the widow's health is still refracted through this gleaming apparition. Hence, the white-clad figures of the medical team appear to be so weightless that they almost look like the astral projections that had been described at great length by two well-known theosophists. As art historian Sixten Ringbom has pointed out, in *Thought-Forms* (1901) and *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902) Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater assigned fixed meanings to the different colours that are apparent in the aura that surrounds the human body. Of these various mental and spiritual emanations, the most rarefied (those that are closest to the Universal Mind) were associated with an incandescent light that was not tinted with any hue, much like Sirk's unusual presentation of Helen Phillips's operation.<sup>27</sup> In effect, the director's luminous two-dimensional image of this critical event reveals the intersection of heaven and earth in a manner that is analogous to Edward Randolph's paintings. While the viewer cannot yet pass through the portal that it discloses and completely fuse with the Divine, we are still part of a cosmic circuit that links us to the empyrean. Whatever is transpiring down below (and there is no doubt that Merrick's medical training also plays a vital role), the injured widow's recovery could not have been achieved without invoking a loftier power.

This is not to say that Sirk was necessarily familiar with the writings of Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, Rudolf Steiner or any of the other major exponents of this influential syncretistic religion. Since the director once stated that he "worked during the Expressionist period as a stage director [and also] painted in an Expressionist manner", however, then it is probably safe to assume that he would at least have been familiar with the most well-known publications of Wassily Kandinsky, who was one of the main progenitors of this pioneering early twentieth-century German aesthetic movement.<sup>28</sup> As many scholars have already pointed out, Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige der Kunst* or *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was steeped in theosophy, and the artist specifically placed the adherents of this religious faith amongst those enlightened groups "who seek to approach the problem of the spirit through inner knowledge."<sup>29</sup> According to Sixten Ringbom, the Munich based Russian painter was familiar with

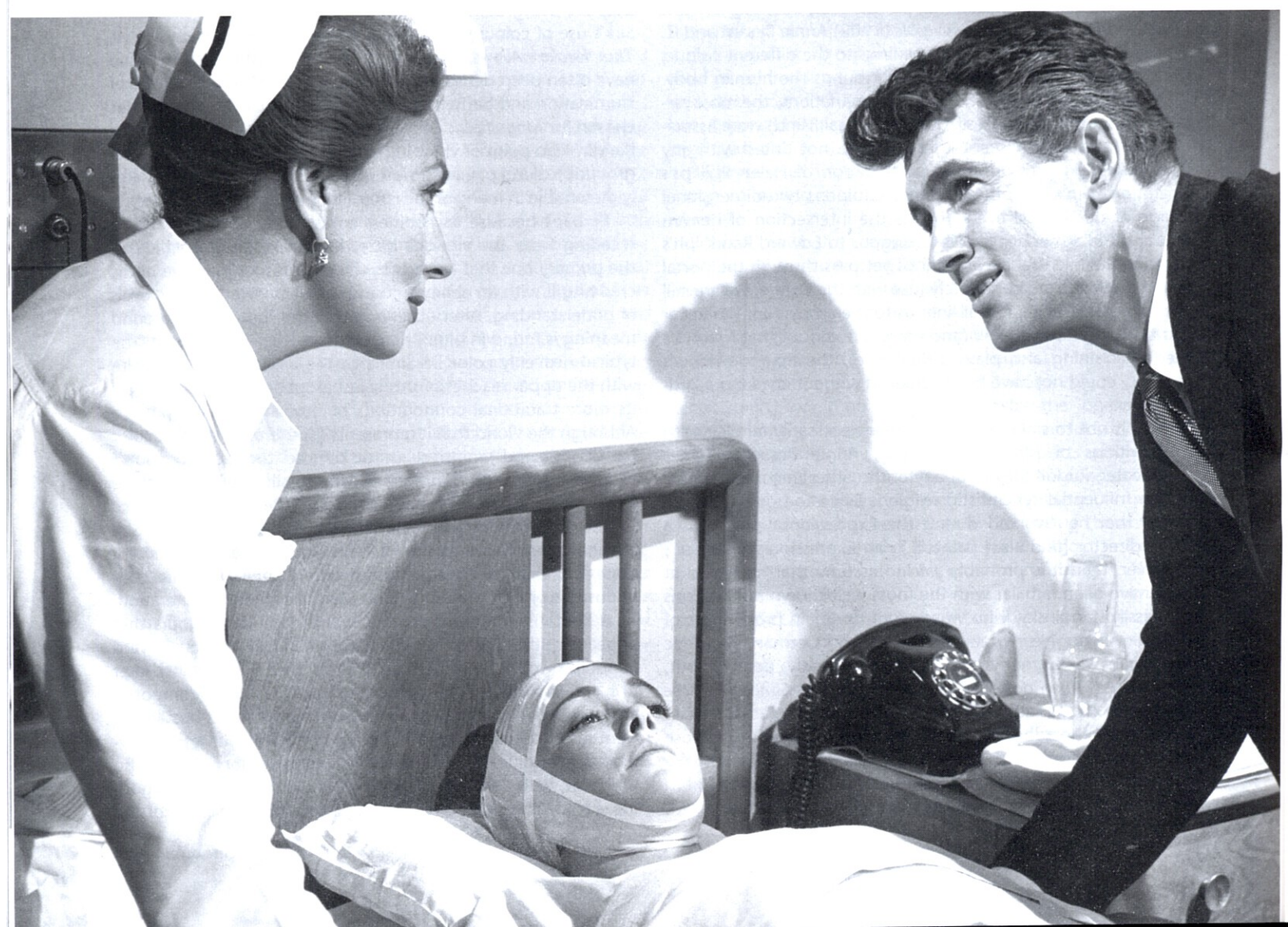
many of the key theosophical texts that would have provided him with a template for a transcendental realm "where freely floating colours and forms...reveal the...ideas and thoughts of spiritual beings [and]...the observer feels himself in the midst of the creative laws of the Cosmos".<sup>30</sup> In seeking to describe how certain pictorial elements manage to convey the celestial infinity that lies just beyond material reality in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, this revolutionary artist also laid the groundwork for many subsequent mystically inclined modernist painters all around the world.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that Kandinsky believed that colours and shapes could be manipulated in order to produce the desired psychic effect (eliciting vibrations from the onlooker's mind and soul) even if an image was not strictly non-objective.<sup>32</sup> Since in 1912 "the revolt from nature was just beginning", he would eventually concede "purely abstract forms are beyond the artist at present", going on to say "to limit [the painter] to the purely indefinite would be to rob him...of possibilities [by] exclud[ing] the human element and therefore weaken[ing] his expression."<sup>33</sup> By the time *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was finally published, however, Kandinsky had begun to experiment with wholly abstract compositions, relying upon the "the language of form and color" that he had already codified to suggest the ineffable space of the Divine. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the symbolic associations that the artist had attributed to a small group of hues, tonalities and shapes in his pioneering aesthetic treatise should still be apparent even when they are being utilized within a more figurative context. While Sirk's use of colour would become even more innovative in *All That Heaven Allows*, where large pools of red, yellow or blue have often been detached from any specific object or source of illumination and bathe the entire scene, the palette that he has chosen for *Magnificent Obsession* is still highly significant from a Kandinskian point of view. In particular, spots or swathes of the groundbreaking painter's most mystical colours are immediately discernible in many of the latter film's most crucial sequences.

Perhaps because its coolness makes this tint appear to be receding from the viewer's gaze, Kandinsky classified blue as the primary hue that appeals to the spirit rather than the body, crediting it with an ability to transport the viewer to new levels of understanding. After observing that the "power of profound meaning is found in blue", he would eventually proclaim it "the typical heavenly color".<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the artist associated white with the upper reaches of this celestial sphere, while also listing its more traditional connotations of "joy and spotless purity". Although the world that it represents (one "from which all color has disappeared") might seem too remote "to touch our souls", white continues to be "pregnant with possibilities" that include the spectator's potential spiritual rebirth.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps in deference to this anti-materialistic painter's metaphysical ranking, Sirk adds touches of blue and/or white to every scene in *Magnificent Obsession* that has been infused with a similar cosmic consciousness or is important to Bob Merrick's moral regeneration.

A Kandinskian interpretation of the dominant colours that appear in the scene in which Merrick first meets Edward Randolph would go something like this. Late one evening, after drinking too much in the limbo of a dark gray bar ("composed of two inactive colours"), our handsome protagonist breaks free from his dissolute friends and begins his fateful journey by driving off in a blue car, an especially spiritual colour that is also endowed with "an active coolness".<sup>36</sup> He soon fails to negotiate a right hand turn and crashes into a ditch in front of the







mysterious painter's house. Sirk then cuts to an American shot that is held for a relatively long period, which forces the camera to track alongside Merrick as he performs a whole string of separate activities. As the wealthy playboy climbs out of his convertible, stumbles along the length of its body, drops to his knees to examine a damaged front wheel, straightens up, reaches down to pick up a piece of a broken barricade and stands and gazes off into space (towards the painter's residence), the background continues to be dominated by the shadowy blue bulk of his car. It should also be noted that the wooden barrier that his automobile destroys (which includes the plank inscribed with the word "danger" that he carries up to the artist's house) has been painted yellow, a colour that Kandinsky associates with a shallow, self-serving materialism.<sup>37</sup> Hence, this shattered structure appears to offer an obvious warning against continuing along his current path, a conclusion that Merrick's crucial encounter with Edward Randolph will subsequently confirm.

The hapless motorist then staggers up the hill towards the artist's studio, where he will find himself surrounded by white painted walls, gazing upon a selection of equally luminous canvases that are largely coloured blue and white, all of which Kandinsky would suggest points to a more celestial sphere. Moreover, it should also be noted that Randolph is dressed in similar hues, wearing a deep blue cravat, a white shirt and a long white smock, since he had been engaged in working on a painting before hearing a knock on his door. Despite joking "As far as I'm concerned, Art is just is just a man's name", Merrick appears genuinely shaken by the force of Randolph's latest image as soon as he realizes that it is a portrait of Dr. Wayne Phillips. The drunken intruder immediately turns the face of this canvas away from himself in a spontaneous gesture of shame, an action that also denies the audience any glimpse of the saintly doctor's material form. During the shot/reverse shot sequence in which Merrick lists the series of strange connections that has left him feeling "haunted" by Phillips' spectral presence, we are never allowed to see anything more than the inchoate whorl of colour (again dominated by blue) that forms the lower corner of Randolph's portrait of his friend. Hence, this disembodied figure comes to represent the cosmic energy that flows from the Universal Mind, which Kandinsky believed has the power to trigger corresponding vibrations within our souls. Only after Merrick's conscience has been stirred by this blue tinted and rather ghostly depiction of his self-sacrificing predecessor will he begin to be redeemed. Nevertheless, this wayward character's spiritual awakening has already been foreshadowed by the blue light that suffused his clothing whenever he mentioned his affinity with the dead philanthropist whose life and work he would eventually carry on. Merrick then passes out, and it is while they are having breakfast the next day that Randolph discusses Wayne Phillip's altruistic philosophy (his "magnificent obsession" was to "be of real service" to those in need) as well as the transcendental source of his own art. In the shot/reverse shot exchange that occurs near the end of this scene (in which the two men are seated across from one another at the dining room table), the painter is glimpsed against an empty expanse of white wall flanked by a side table occupied by a lamp.

In my opinion, everything about Randolph's presentation in this sequence alludes to the higher reality that he is speaking of, both the "heavenly" colour scheme (the white background and his blue ascot and shirt) and the lamp that he turns on and off

in order to illustrate his description of the flow of this celestial energy. Although Merrick's clothing looks very different after the sun has risen, his half light (a white shirt and tie "pregnant with possibilities") and half dark (a black suit implying "no possibilities") attire still seems to indicate that he has arrived at a significant moral crossroad.<sup>38</sup> From this point onward, the wealthy playboy must either choose to go forward into the "great period of the spiritual" or to remain enmeshed in the ongoing "nightmare of materialism".<sup>39</sup> He elects to pursue the former course, which is signaled as much by his subsequent emulation of the artist's fondness for blue and white as by his growing devotion to the welfare of others. For instance, on the afternoon that he begins his tender friendship with Helen Phillips, concludes the secret arrangements for her financial support, and tells Edward Randolph that he has decided to return to medical school, he is wearing a white shirt, a dark blue sweater and a dark blue and white ascot. As we have already seen, during the surgery in which Helen Phillip's sight is miraculously restored, Bob Merrick and the rest of the medical team are dressed completely in white. Even after this procedure has been completed, and we finally see the doctors wheeling their patient out of the white walled operating room, their radiant spiritual doubles still flicker on the darkened window overhead. This ethereal image seems to suggest that the souls of Wayne Phillips and Bob Merrick have finally converged, as the younger man continues to observe the late doctor's directive to "Go out of your way to do good for others, accept[ing] no payment or acclaim."

Perhaps Kandinsky's most radical discovery was the realization that non-objective painting had an affective power that could directly influence the viewer's inner psyche. In the last chapter of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he declared: "Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings" and "the artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another to cause vibrations in the soul."<sup>40</sup> But according to this philosophy, the true artist wasn't seeking to evoke a particular spiritual sensation for its own sake, but rather to galvanize the onlooker into pursuing a less self-serving and materialistic way of life. Similarly, Sirk also believed that motion pictures "should move an audience" so that "they should think politics with emotions" and be prompted to consider some of the larger social issues of the day.<sup>41</sup> That *Magnificent Obsession* had something of this stimulating effect on its original spectators is evident from the reaction cards that were filled in by the test audience who attended the initial preview that took place on January 11, 1954. According to one anonymous spectator, part of Merrick's process of moral regeneration will entail learning that there are "things which you cannot buy with a check." This was one of the surprisingly abstract ethical observations that was elicited by the routine studio question, "which scenes did you like the most?"<sup>42</sup> While other respondents favored scenes that were more action oriented ("Speedboat, lake, color and crash", "Automobile accident") or more connected with the love story ("The two of them together in Europe", "Fireworks and folkdancing scene"), a significant subset preferred the scenes that were associated with Bob Merrick's spiritual transformation ("Bob's talk near the beginning with Randolph", "Rock Hudson's return to reality-things which you cannot buy with a check"). Consequently, even though the film's romantic subplot is undoubtedly important, the comments that were recorded at its inaugural showing should make us recognize just how multi-faceted the reception of the contemporary audience actually was. If nothing else,



these brief critiques of *Magnificent Obsession* appear to confirm that the 1950s spectator exercised his or her emotional and cognitive faculties both in order to make sense of the director's non-mimetic approach to his material and to consider how we might construct a better world.

*Ms. Evans would like to thank Catherine Fowler and Erika Wolf for helping her to develop some of the ideas that have been further elaborated in this paper.*

## Notes

- 1 Sirk once described his stylistic approach to *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life* for James Harvey by borrowing a string of appellations from the visual arts.

[*Written on the Wind* is] even a kind of surrealism. The people are heightened versions of reality...And the whole picture is in a kind of poster style, with a flat, simple lighting that concentrates the effects. It's a kind of expressionism...And I avoid what a painter might call sentimental colors—pale or soft colors. Here I paint in primary colors like [the German Expressionist artists] Kirchner or Nolde, for example. Or even like [the Surrealist painter] Miró...[The scene where Susan Kohner is beaten up for trying to pass as white in *Imitation of Life*] is like *Written on the Wind*. Expressionistic. It was done with a broad brush and a strong drawing hand. It's not like the rest of the picture—which is impressionistic on the whole.

- See pages 55-57 of Harvey's "Sirkumstantial Evidence", *Film Comment*, 14, No. 4 (1978).
- 2 Michael Stern, "Sirk Speaks in <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/sirkinterview.htm>," p.4. This interview originally appeared in issue 6 (Winter 1977-1978) of the discontinued print version of *Bright Lights*.
- 3 Hence, I would disagree with Paul Willeman's contention that Sirk's non-naturalistic visual style should be interpreted as a Brechtian alienation device. See his "Distanciation and Douglas Sirk" and "Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System" in Lucy Fischer's *Imitation of Life* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 268-272 and 273-278.
- 4 See the undated document entitled "Magnificent Obsession'-Campaign Ideas-A. Movies are Growing Up" in Box 414, File 12352 of the Universal-International Pictures archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
- 5 See David Weiss's undated typescript entitled "Magazine and Newspaper Ideas for Magnificent Obsession" in Box 414, File 12352 of the Universal-International Pictures archives.
- 6 Jim O'Connor's review (published in the *New York Journal-American* on 5 August 1954) was entitled "'Magnificent Obsession': Dramatic, Exalted Film". See the Douglas Sirk Clipping File in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 7 While discussing Dr. Hudson's personal convictions in the novel, one of his medical colleagues remarks "You would think, to hear his prattle, that he was a wealthy and neurotic old lady trying to graduate from theosophy to Baháism..." See page 5 of Lloyd C. Douglas's *Magnificent Obsession* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952 reprint of the 1936 edition). Dr. Hudson's surname was changed to Phillips in Sirk's film version of this novel because Rock Hudson had been cast in the part of Bob Merrick.
- 8 Dennis Reid, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Works of Lawren S. Harris* (Toronto: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985), 12.
- 9 Jean-Loup Bourget, "God is Dead, or Through a Glass Darkly", in [www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/sirkgodis.htm](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/sirkgodis.htm), 2-4. This essay originally appeared in issue 6 (Winter 1977-1978) of the discontinued print version of *Bright Lights*.
- 10 According to theosophists, Christ did represent just one of a whole brotherhood of spiritual Adepts who have guided the upward ascending evolution of humanity. Others include Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tze, Solomon and many others. See Bruce F. Campbell's *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophy Movement* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), page 54.
- 11 Bourget, 2.
- 12 Bourget, 4-5, Stern 10.
- 13 Bourget, 5.
- 14 Reid, 12.
- 15 H.P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings 1888: The Secret Doctrine* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1979), II, 507-509.
- 16 Blavatsky, 492, 511-512.
- 17 Blavatsky, 472.
- 18 The prominently placed lighting fixtures are perhaps the most important mystical motifs in this scene, since they are readily apparent throughout and seem to suggest a more divine effulgence. When Merrick struggles to find the courage to try out his former professor's new surgical technique, he is standing directly below the light that extends outward from the wall on the far side of the room. To my mind, this juxtaposition is just as significant as the reverse shot of the artist, whose unwavering gaze seems to be

willing his friend to go on. After Randolph has left, Merrick will complete this complex medical procedure beneath the large circular lamp that is suspended over the operating table.

- 19 While developing a parallel between William Shakespeare and the Hollywood director, Sirk pretends to be a producer pitching a "crazy story" featuring "ghosts, murder, tearing the hair", wittily concluding with the statement "It's called Magnificent Ob...no, Hamlet." See page 5 of Stern's "Sirk Speaks."
- 20 Stern, 10.
- 21 Sixten Ringbom, "'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), 402-406.
- 22 Blavatsky, 561-562.
- 23 Blavatsky, 492 and Ringbom, 396.
- 24 Annie Besant, *A Study in Consciousness* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1967 reprint of the 1904 edition), 26, 31.
- 25 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977 re-print of the 1914 edition), 9, 46-47.
- 26 After asserting that Dr. Wayne Phillips=God (which means that God is dead), Bourget then proposes that the figure of the artist is presented as a God-substitute, and that the director himself performs a similar function (page 4). As I have already pointed out, within a theosophical system all of these individuals would have been expected to share a portion of this divine afflatus and to each remain linked to God to some degree. Even though as long as we remain within our fleshly bodies we can neither completely fuse with nor fully comprehend this originary Oversoul, it is also never entirely absent.
- 27 Ringbom 397-398.
- 28 Peter Lehman, "Thinking With the Heart: An Interview With Douglas Sirk", *Wide-Angle*, 3, No. 4 (1978), 46.
- 29 Kandinsky, 13.
- 30 Ringbom, 404.
- 31 For instance, if you look at the work of the most significant early twentieth-century Modernist painters associated with New Mexico (the place where Helen Phillips' vision is miraculously restored at the end of Sirk's version of *Magnificent Obsession*), it seems clear that Kandinsky's theories had a major impact on both the figurative artists (such as Georgia O'Keeffe) and those artists who had begun to experiment with pure abstraction. While O'Keeffe's ineffable desert landscapes are well-known, the Taos based Transcendental Painting Group (which was formed in 1938 and included Canadian painter Lawren Harris among its founding members) also hoped to foster a "more intense preoccupation with the life of the spirit" through the creation of a completely non-objective art. Like Kandinsky, they believed that "painting that...[went] beyond the appearance of the physical world" would enable them to enter "imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual." See Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-garde 1912-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1992), 88-89. It is important to note that Helen Hudson's life saving operation was performed in an urban hospital in the heart of Rome in Lloyd C. Douglas' original novel. See page 295 of his *Magnificent Obsession*. By contrast, in Sirk's 1954 film adaptation her sight is restored in an austere International Style building that has been located in an unspoiled, spiritually charged American desert landscape. Given the iconic status that O'Keeffe's paintings of this region had achieved by the 1950s, the transposition of such a key scene to northern New Mexico is probably no coincidence.
- 32 Kandinsky, 24-26.
- 33 Kandinsky, 47, 30.
- 34 Kandinsky, 38.
- 35 Kandinsky, 39.
- 36 Kandinsky 39, 38.
- 37 Kandinsky, 37-38. On page 38 of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky describes yellow as the least spiritual and most earth bound of colours, a hue that "can never have profound meaning." Sirk also emphasised this very Kandinskian collision between yellow and blue in a key scene of *All That Heaven Allows*. When Carey opens her front door to admit Ron just before his first meeting with her children, he is bathed in the free-floating blue light that appears to symbolize his non-materialistic way of life. On the other side of the foyer, Ned and Kaye have been immersed in the diffuse yellow hue that signifies their intense preoccupation with money, status and possessions.
- 38 To Kandinsky, black represented "A totally dead silence, ...a silence with no possibilities, ...the silence of death." See page 39 of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. While Merrick's suit is technically a dark, charcoal grey, the way in which it has been lit throughout this metaphysical discussion makes it appear to be black.
- 39 Kandinsky, "Reminiscences/Three Pictures" in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, Volume I, eds. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber), 377 and *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 2.
- 40 Kandinsky, 25.
- 41 Lehman, 46.
- 42 See "Reports picked up from the theatre after the first sneak preview, held Monday, January 11, 1954 at the Encino Theatre, Encino California" in Box 690, File 22500 of the Universal-International Pictures archives.



# From Hephaistos to the Silver Screen

## LIVING STATUES, ANTIQUITY AND CINEMA

By VITO ADRIAENSENS

Lynda Nead has pointed out that the dream of motion has haunted visual arts from the classical period to the present and the same can be said of the literature that spawned many of these visual representations.<sup>1</sup> As the foremost image-maker of our time, it should come as no surprise that cinema itself reflects the animation of static people in its subject matter, for the tension between stasis and movement is at the heart of the medium. The fascination for breathing life into the lifeless is, of course, as old as time itself. The most prevalent creation myths implicitly or explicitly employ the image of the deity as a sculptural artist who breathes life into a clay or dust effigy; more often than not, the statue is fashioned in the deity's own image, essentially making it a self-portrait.<sup>2</sup> The main literary sources for these myths are the writings of ancient Greek and Roman philologists such as Hesiod, Homer, Ovid, Pseudo-Apollodorus and Apollonius of Rhodes, who not only speak of the sculptural marvel that is mankind, but of other significant statuary as well. It is these ancient Greek and Roman myths that I will focus on. In most accounts, it was Zeus, king of the Olympians, who commissioned the Titan Prometheus and the Olympian god of fire Hephaistos to create man.<sup>3</sup> Out of water and earth, Hephaistos sculpted man in the likeness of the gods. Prometheus then secretly instructed this new being in the arts of Athena and Hephaistos so that man might fend for himself. The Titan thus tricked the gods on several levels and topped things off by stealing fire from the heavens as a gift to humankind. Not only was Prometheus severely punished for his deeds, mankind also suffered a great blow in the form of the second divine sculpture, Pandora, the first woman. Hephaistos sculpted this creature and her beauty and cunning were meant to be the ruin of man. She was gifted to Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus, and inadvertently unleashed evils from a Greek *pithos*, or storage jar, that was a wedding present from Zeus. These evils would plague mankind forever, but would not be able to extinguish the flame of hope.<sup>4</sup>

The primordial Greek tale of sculptures coming to life was by no means restricted to a creationist context, however. Deborah Tarn Steiner has traced the function and form of statuary from Greek and Roman literary art histories, be they Homeric, Hesiodic, Ovidian or Virgilian, to the art of archaic and classical

Greece in her astounding work *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic Greek Literature and Thought* (2001). Her study lays bare a wide-ranging spectrum of representational strategies with regard to Greek statuary in both myth and reality. Steiner describes figurines and statues that doubled for the dead or absent and preserved the talismanic properties of its originals, an act of "presentification" that led to their symbolic use in rituals where the effigies would be honored or cursed, but one that did not dismiss the possession of other properties, for "combined in the single piece, several kinds of image 'magic' are at work."<sup>5</sup> The craftsmanship with which these statues were animated by late sixth-century and early fifth-century sculptors is a case in point. Steiner rightly argues that the artistry and materiality of these sculptures elevated them from mere representational objects to vivified artifacts.<sup>6</sup> This animation was effectuated through inscriptions and ornamentation that highlighted its status as an object of craftsmanship, and, more importantly, through posture and anatomy. The development in Greek sculpture from the Archaic (800 to 500 B.C.) to the Classical (500 to 323 B.C.) period saw the stiffness of the *kouroi* give way to a more naturalistic freedom of movement of expression, or as Richard Neer describes it: "The result was an amplified, hyperbolic version of the Archaic style. Classical *contrapposto* ratcheted up the internal inconsistencies of the *kouros* stance, and Classical movement bet everything on striking and awing the beholder. From the poise of the *kouros* to the headlong rush of the Tyrannicides is a natural evolution."<sup>7</sup> The dynamic postures of the Classical period were, indeed, amplified. From Kritios and Nesiotes' threateningly advancing *muscleman* Harmodios and Aristogeiton, known as the Tyrannicides or tyrant killers (477-476 B.C.), and Polykleitos's athletically balanced Doryphoros in *contrapposto* (450-400 B.C.) to Myron's unnatural but compellingly dynamic *discus* throwing Diskobolus (460-450 B.C.) and Lysippos' monumental leaning Hercules, known to us as the Farnese Hercules (4th century B.C.), Classical Greek sculpture embraced movement to the extent that it sought to blur the lines between bronze and flesh. The illusion of life that exudes from these idealized frozen bodies was sometimes even complemented by an open mouth that not only fit a narrative context in which the subjects spoke or sang to one another, but could also indicate the process of breathing; this can, for instance, be seen in the Riace bronzes



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(ca. 460 B.C.).<sup>8</sup> The magical qualities that these statues possessed by grace of their supreme craftsmanship came to fruition in the expansive mythology that put their subject in perspective and could make them come to life quite literally. It was these tales, situated in an almost timeless antique world populated with Olympian gods, demigods, monstrous creatures and mysterious living statues, that found their way to the silver screen.

### Sculpting Pygmalion

As early as 1898, Georges Méliès appropriated one of the classic tropes of Greek mythology in *Pygmalion et Galathée* to demonstrate his own magical craftsmanship. As an illusionist, magician and pioneer in cinematic special effects, Méliès, more than anyone, embodied cinema's Pygmalion syndrome. The Ovidian account<sup>9</sup> tells of a Cypriot sculptor who, frustrated with the vices of the Propoetides (women driven to prostitution by a vengeful Venus<sup>10</sup>), decided to create his own perfect female out of ivory. The beauty of the virtuous statue was so breathtaking that the sculptor fell in love with his own creation and beseeched Venus to bestow it with life. The artist's wish was granted and the cold ivory turned to warm flesh at his touch:

He kisses her white lips, renews the bliss,  
And looks, and thinks they redden at the kiss;  
He thought them warm before: nor longer stays,  
But next his hand on her hard bosom lays:  
Hard as it was, beginning to relent,  
It seem'd, the breast beneath his fingers bent;  
He felt again, his fingers made a print;  
'Twas flesh, but flesh so firm, it rose against the dint:  
The pleasing task he fails not to renew;  
Soft, and more soft at ev'ry touch it grew;  
Like pliant wax, when chasing hands reduce  
The former mass to form, and frame for use.  
He would believe, but yet is still in pain,  
And tries his argument of sense again,  
Presses the pulse, and feels the leaping vein.  
Convinc'd, o'erjoy'd, his studied thanks, and praise,  
To her, who made the miracle, he pays:  
Then lips to lips he join'd; now freed from fear,  
He found the savour of the kiss sincere:  
At this the waken'd image op'd her eyes,  
And view'd at once the light, and lover with surprise.<sup>11</sup>

Actual cinematic retellings of this myth in a Classical or mythological context are rare, however, because George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play *Pygmalion* provided filmmakers with more fertile and realistic grounds upon which to build their stories. Shaw's update was inspired by the popularity of the Pygmalion myth on the nineteenth-century stage,<sup>12</sup> but turned the story of a statue come to life into a social commentary on the class system by having a professor educate and edify a young Cockney woman in the ways of the upper class, shaping her to his demands like a sculptor would. The most famous incarnation of Shaw's play is undoubtedly *My Fair Lady*, the 1956 Broadway musical by Loewe and Lerner that was turned into an eponymous motion picture with Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison in 1964 by George Cukor. Cukor had already explored the Shavian *Pygmalion* in *Born Yesterday* (1950) and *A Star is Born* (1954), a plot that was explored indirectly in hundreds of films, from *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1948) to *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990).

This is not to say, however, that Pygmalion was completely absent from film history as a sculptor breathing life into inert matter, far from it. The horror genre proved to be an exceptionally fruitful breeding ground for all sorts of inversions and perversions of the Pygmalion myth, but almost never in a Greco-Roman or ersatz Classical context. The realistic statue's relation to death is inherent in the idea of the immobilized body, implying that its well-crafted matter was perhaps once alive, or, better yet, might still one day break loose from its bronze, marble or stone constraints. The horror film's predilection for visceral effects related to the manipulation and violation of the human body lent itself perfectly for the figure of the insane sculptor and his creations, trapping living beings inside of sculptures, transforming them into sculptures, or using body parts as primary source material. It was in the nineteenth-century fascination for the wax museum that the insane sculptor first found his way onto the stage and, later, the silver screen. The wax statue's uncanny semblance of life had been unnerving and fascinating visitors of wax cabinets and museums since the late 17th and 18th century, when, for instance, the anatomical waxes of La Specola in Florence—which opened for the public in 1775<sup>13</sup>—enticed spectators with wax dolls in sultry poses and the opportunity to quite literally “dig into” the subject matter that was put on display. The unmistakable eroticization of the statues made it an almost necrophiliac experience, especially given the fact that the statues' faces and hands were often modeled off of actual corpses, and that visitors were allowed to touch the waxes, or even spend some private time with them, for a few dollars more.<sup>14</sup> With the popularization of the wax museum as a form of popular entertainment in the nineteenth century, Madame Tussauds being chief among them, and the addition of a very popular Chamber of Horrors that coupled the anatomical realism of the waxes to gruesome visceral events from past and present, came the fictional characterization of the wax museum's artist as a madman. The French Grand Guignol theatre probably first picked up on this idea through André de Lorde's 1910 stage production *Figures de Cire*, brought to the screen eponymously in 1914 by Maurice Tourneur, but it was an unpublished story by Charles Spencer Belden entitled *The Wax Works* that introduced the Pygmalion myth into the equation and launched a horror trope that is still being reproduced. Warner Brothers bought Belden's story and first turned it into the early Technicolor gem *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (Michael Curtiz, 1933), before reworking it in 1953 as the 3-D Technicolor *House of Wax* (André De Toth), and doing the same in 2005 when they released Jaume Collet-Serra's *House of Wax*. The first two films were highly influential and depicted the wax artist as a Pygmalionesque genius who, embittered by the loss of his beloved wax dolls in a crippling fire, starts rebuilding his collection by covering murdered lookalikes of his favorite figures, as well as his enemies, in a thin layer of wax. Interestingly, the presence of the doubles instigates a reversal of the Pygmalion pattern in the artist. Instead of being overjoyed at the occasion of finding his figures come to life in a sense, the artist wants to “immortalize” them in wax, a process of mortification, or “thanatography,”<sup>15</sup> that keeps the artist in control of his own work. The reverse Pygmalion motif was prominent in (wax) sculptors after *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* in films such as *Mad Love* (Karl Freund, 1935), *A Bucket of Blood* (Roger Corman, 1959), *Nightmare in Wax* (Bud Townsend, 1969), *Waxwork* (Anthony Hickox, 1988) and *Maschera di Cera* (Sergio Stivaletti, 1997).



## Of Swords, Sandals and Statues

Although the Pygmalion figure itself did not appear often in a classical mythological context on screen, production companies did not wait long to create the perfect setting for the rich collection of popular historical and mythological stories. From 1908 on, not coincidentally the advent of the *film d'art* movement, there was a sharp rise in the number of historically and mythologically themed films in Europe. Like their later counterparts of the 1950s, these films were billed as grand spectacles, uniting the best that the filmmaking business had to offer. The antique backdrop was an ideal way to draw in audiences through advances in film technology, screenwriting and production design, creating what is known as the "historical epic". As Blanshard and Shahabudin have shown,<sup>16</sup> the success of "cine-antiquity" was not only due to key technological advances, but also to the rise of nationalism and the popularity of nineteenth-century historical novels such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* (1895). Historical and mythological subject matter were particularly well represented on the French and Italian silver screens.

The French had more of a penchant for the mythological, for instance in major productions by Louis Feuillade at Gaumont, who churned out a number of high quality myth-inspired films, such as *La Légende de la Fileuse* (1908), which deals with the story of the weaver Arachne, *Prométhée* (1908), *l'Amour et Psyché* (1908), *La Légende de Narcisse* (1908), *La Légende de Midas* (1910), *La Légende de Daphné* (1910) and *La Fiancée d'Éole* (1911). This was much to the dismay of French theatre owners, who quickly grew tired of the "outdated" genre and publicly asked for more modern dramas.<sup>17</sup> The Italians, on their part, were keener on historical epics. It were the Itala Film and Società Italiana Cines film companies that truly established the genre conventions for the historical epic or, almost synonymous with it, the so-called "sword-and-sandal" or "peplum" films. At Itala, star director Giovanni Pastrone paved the way for American productions. When his 1911 effort *La Caduta di Troia* (The Fall of Troy) opened to full houses in the United States, it was named film of the week by *Moving Picture World*, who described it as a "great spectacular production" and a "masterpiece of art and human endeavor;" the magazine furthermore admitted the European supremacy in the field of historical subject matter: "For historical productions like 'The Fall of Troy,' the European manufacturer has it all over the American producer. The old country is, of course, more full of opportunity, and its history is more prolific of incident."<sup>18</sup> While Cines was very productive with directors such as Enrico Guazzoni and Mario Caserini, it was not until Guazzoni's 1913 *Quo Vadis?* that the company could score an international hit. In the same year, Mario Caserini and Eleuterio Rodolfi made *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii* (The Last Days of Pompeii) for the Società Anonima Ambrosio, but all were blown out of the water when Giovanni Pastrone and Itala presented *Cabiria* in 1914. The famed Italian writer and poet Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote the film's titles and the film's heavy overseas promotion highlighted this fact.<sup>19</sup> *Moving Picture World* devoted an entire spread to the film entitled: "Italia's (sic) Big New Twelve-Part Spectacular Masterpiece, a Worthy Successor to Illustrious Predecessors."<sup>20</sup> The film was a great influence to filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith, whose equally epic *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages* (1916) was greatly indebted to *Cabiria* in

terms of production design, camera movement and subject matter. Furthermore, the Italian epic was responsible for creating one of the first, if not *the* first, Herculean action heroes that became a staple of the peplum genre in the 1950s and 1960s. The Italian strongman's name was Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano) and his muscular physique and rugged good looks made him a hit. So much so that the character spawned almost fifty films from the 1910s to the 1970s.

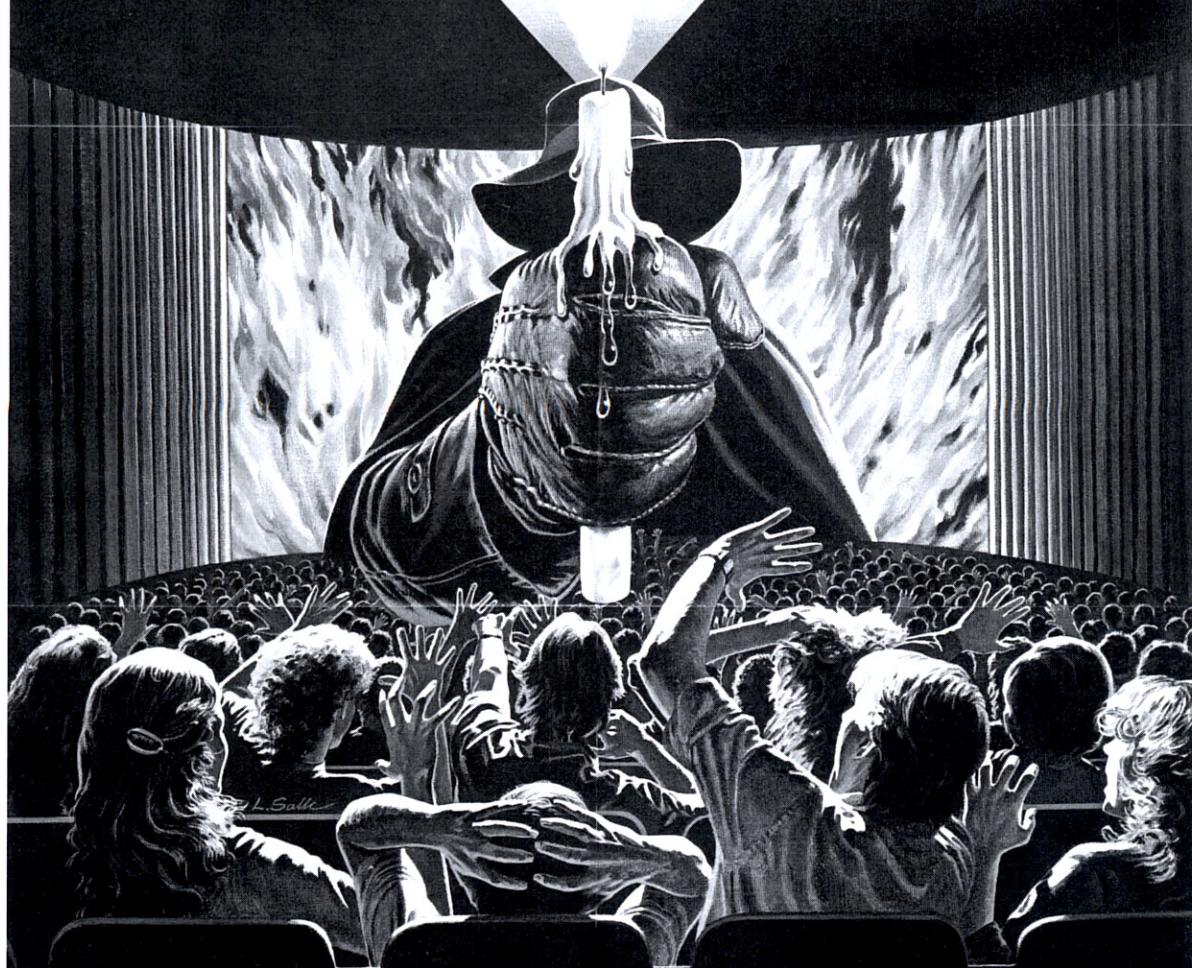
The leap from the historical epic to the peplum or sword-and-sandal film is not a great one. The two latter terms were used in a somewhat derogatory sense, and while sword-and-sandal is rather self-explanatory, "peplum" refers to the Greek word "peplos" for robe or tunic,<sup>21</sup> garments that were worn in Greco-Roman times but which grew ridiculously short in the second wave of American and Italian antiquity films in the 1950s and 1960s. The main distinction, it seems, lies in the nature of the productions. In the 1950s, Hollywood's technological advances but dropping attendance numbers prompted a new wave of spectacular cinema that aimed to lure television viewers away from their tiny black and white screens and into the fully equipped color and widescreen cinemas, where they could enjoy epic films that sought to stimulate their imagination and astonish their senses. It was no coincidence, then, that the first Hollywood film to be shown in widescreen was a Roman Biblical epic fittingly named *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953). The film was second in a line of epic Roman prestige pictures that was initiated by the Technicolor rendering of *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951) and followed by *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Anthony Mann, 1964). These were all expensive productions that "were also associated with the prestige and reputations of the studios, both because of their technical virtuosity and their economic scale. Their 'event' status made them ideal candidates for awards."<sup>22</sup> The flipside of the big-budget Hollywood epics could be found in Italy, where the subject matter was turned into the quickly made and cheap genre fare that is conventionally known as "peplum cinema," even though the generic codes often apply to American cinema as well. Blanshard and Shahabudin define this particular genre as referring to the

...large volume of films produced in Italy between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s that took as their subject matter a story involving a hero or adventurer from the ancient world. They have a number of distinctive elements. Muscular body-builders (often American) were cast as the heroic leads. Female love-interests were pretty, slim, and always in need of rescuing (...) and there was normally a sexually voracious, vampy female who tried to seduce the hero away from his task of overthrowing tyranny and rescuing his 'true' love. Opponents tended to rely upon extra-natural resources (e.g. sorcery, mythical monsters, advanced technology) to advance their schemes, only to be thwarted by the natural strength and stout heart of the hero. Other regular features included the presence of elaborate dance sequences performed by scantily-clad women, set-piece demonstrations of heroic strength (...) and the very noticeable dubbing of voices (...) as there was rarely any budget for live sound recording.<sup>23</sup>



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'til you've been scared in

**3D**



# HOUSE OF WAX


**THE CLASSIC  
3-D HORROR MOVIE OF ALL TIME.**

Starring VINCENT PRICE · FRANK LOVEJOY · PHYLLIS KIRK  
CAROLYN JONES · PAUL PICERNI · CHARLES BRONSON as Igor

Screenplay by CRANE WILBUR Produced by BRYAN FOY Directed by ANDRE DE TOTH

**PG** PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED  
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

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The most famous of these statuesque bodybuilders in peplum cinema were Steve Reeves and Reg Park. They both played Hercules several times and were succeeded by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno in the late 1970s and 1980s, when a third wave<sup>24</sup> of peplum and peplum fantasy films—sometimes called sword-and-sorcery films—such as *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981) *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), *The Beastmaster* (Don Coscarelli, 1982), *Hercules* (Luigi Cozzi, 1983) and *Conan the Destroyer* (Richard Fleischer, 1984) rolled into town. The fourth wave, finally, seems to have started with *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and has worked its way through the 2000s with films such as *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) and TV shows such as *Rome* (2005–2007), possibly culminating around 2010 with TV's *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010–...), *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier, 2010), *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: the Lightning Thief* (Chris Columbus, 2010) *Immortals* (Tarsem Singh, 2011), *Wrath of the Titans* (Jonathan Liebesman, 2012) and another installment of the *Percy Jackson* series, Thor Freudenthal's *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013)". These different waves of full-blown antiquity revivals are most interesting, for they encompass an incorporation of mythological and supernatural elements into a Classical context that brings us back to the main focus of our paper, namely the cinematic presence of mythological living sculptures.

### Fire from the Gods

Perhaps most interesting among the many instances of statues coming to life in peplum cinema are those linked to the mythological master craftsman himself, the Olympian god of blacksmiths, artisans, sculptors, metallurgy, fire and volcanoes, Hephaistos. As opposed to Pygmalion, however, Hephaistos was never really deemed a screen-worthy character, it was mostly his legendary creations that made it onto film. This is strange, to say the least, for the god of blacksmiths' biography makes for quite the read; he was cast from Mount Olympus on several occasions, created woman, bound Prometheus, was married to Aphrodite and was responsible for creating the most

renowned armor, weapons, temples and statues in the whole of Greek mythology. In Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, the divine sculptor is even accompanied by female attendants, or *amphipoloi*, crafted out of gold. One would dare say that a biopic is long overdue.

It were Hephaistos's famed automatons, or self-operating machines, that became a staple of the fantasy variant of the peplum genre. Fittingly, these cinematic creations would themselves be remembered for their unmatched craftsmanship thanks to the many talents of the recently deceased visual effects wizard Ray Harryhausen, who combined expert matte painting and photography skills with believable rear and front projection and thrilling stop-motion model creation and animation to create fantastical worlds in which people interacted with hideous monsters, giant statues and angry skeletons like never before.<sup>25</sup> It was the bronze giant Talos that launched Harryhausen headlong into Hephaistos's wake in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), which tells the tale of the quest for the Golden Fleece. The film opens on a giant painted statue of Hera, Olympian queen of the gods, seated on a throne in one of her temples. Modeled after the actress who portrays her in the film, Honor Blackman, the sculpture's dress, hair and crown are faithful to Hera's representation in vase paintings, although with two of her attributes, the scepter and libation bowl, missing (cf. the Louvre's *Juno Campana*). When King Pelias/Douglas Wilmer brutally murders one of Hera's praying devotees in her sacred temple in the name of Zeus, the goddess materializes and tells the warrior that his shameful deed will cause him to die by the hand of Jason. Twenty years later, Jason/Todd Armstrong saves King Pelias from drowning and tells him of his plan to procure the Golden Fleece. The King encourages Jason to undertake the perilous journey, but sends his son Acastus/Gary Raymond along to make sure that Jason fails. A sturdy boat known as the Argo takes Jason and his ragtag band of adventurers, the Argonauts, on their mission. A painted wooden figurehead of Hera guides Jason through the hazardous waters, opening her eyes and whispering sound advice when it is most needed.<sup>26</sup> The figurehead of Hera eventually



leads the pack to the so-called Isle of Bronze, where the Greek god of sculpture Hephaistos was said to have resided. The Argonauts are advised to take nothing but food and water on the isle populated by gigantic bronze sculptures, but when Hercules/Nigel Green and a friend approach the statue of Talos, they find its pedestal to be filled entirely with riches. When Hercules attempts to sneak a brooch out, the statue of Talos comes to life.

In Pseudo-Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca* and Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, Talos was a bronze giant crafted by Hephaistos and gifted to Europa by Zeus, to protect his lover. Talos, depicted in ancient Greek vase paintings as a handsome clean-shaven young man, would patrol the island of Crete and chase away unwanted visitors by throwing rocks or engaging in physical combat. He is said to have had one long blood vessel from his neck down to his lower ankle containing the magical ichor, the golden blood of gods and immortals, which powered his movements. Harryhausen deviated from the myth and modeled the statue after a bearded Spartan warrior in a fighting stance, donning an Attic helmet, a very short peplos skirt and, of course, a sword and sandals. The stance and the figure were quite possibly inspired by ancient Greek frieze sculpture and statues of the great Spartan king Leonidas. The stop motion magic of Harryhausen convincingly animates the bronze giant as he comes from its pedestal, wrecks the Argo and goes after its crew. It is the figurehead of Hera that advises Jason to defeat the murderous statue by going for its ankle, corresponding with the mythological account of the single vein from neck to ankle and sealed with a stud. It is thus that Jason opens a hatch on the ankle that releases a liquid, seemingly suffocating Talos before his façade starts to crack, he keels over and falls apart.

Harryhausen's next foray into the mythological was Gordon Hessler's *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973), a long-awaited follow-up to Nathan Juran's *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), for which Harryhausen had likewise created spectacular creature and visual effects. Much like the "ancient" or "classical" period in which the peplum genre situated itself, *Sinbad the Sailor's* realm equally provided filmmakers with a timeless, mythological context in which anything goes, from dinosaurs to genies and Cyclopes. It is therefore not at all surprising that the sailing action hero has to face a sword-wielding statue of Kali, brought to life by an evil wizard in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*, and then an evil stepmother commanding a bronze bull and a saber-toothed cat in *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (Sam Wanamaker, 1977). The evil bronze bull that *Sinbad* faces in the latter is an automaton named Minaton, powered by a magical mechanical heart given to it by the wicked Zenobia/Margaret Whiting. With ancient rituals such as bull leaping in the Minoan society, the bull has held a special place in Greek society for a long time, especially on Crete, and this is evidenced by its abundant presence on pottery and in sculpture, with bulls made entirely out of silver and gold as early as the Mycenaean period (c. 1600 BC–c. 1100 BC). The Minaton creature in *Sinbad* could have been an actual Minotaur, a mythical beast spawned from the congress between a bull and a human being, but Harryhausen opted for an automaton that not only echoes his own screen wizardry in its magical animation, but also harks back to Hephaistos, as he had created two bronze fire-breathing bull automatons, or *khalkotauroi*, and given them to King Aëtes of Colchis.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the bronze bull was reputedly also turned into a torture device as early as the 6th century B.C., when poor souls would be locked

up in a hollow bronze bull, also called brazen bull or Sicilian bull, and let to roast inside as a fire was set up underneath it. The bull's sculptor was a metalworker named Perillos, who made it for the despot Phalaris, but the poor artist was allegedly the first one to test its effectiveness.<sup>28</sup>

### Ghosts in the Shell

In the case of the automaton, the ghost in the shell was not literally a *deus ex machina*, but supposedly a combination of technical virtuosity and supernatural magic elements, such as the ichor that powered the Talos figure. Another case in point is the mechanical owl that accompanies Perseus/Harry Hamlin on his quest in *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981), which is also ridiculed in a brief cameo in the 2010 *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier) and makes an even more ridiculous appearance as a mechanical pigeon in David Gordon Green's medieval quest parody *Your Highness* (2011).<sup>29</sup> In the film, the bird is meant to be a well-crafted replica of Athena's owl, Baubo, put together by Hephaistos to help guide the young Perseus. The Athenian owl was, in fact, a powerful symbol that was widespread in Classical Greek culture, but I have found no references to a mechanical creature devised by Hephaistos, not that one would expect Harryhausen's inspiration to be limited to literary sources, of course. In fact, true to his research methods, the cinematic shape of the little owl does mirror the artistic representation of Athena's own, which was traditionally called Glaukos, meaning "glaring eyes." It is these eyes that stand out in the images preserved on (Early) Classical Greek pottery, 5th century B.C. silver tetradrachm coins, and the owl figurines that one is bombarded with when visiting Athens. Its diminutive frame and large eyes do give the little owl a very artificial appearance, especially on the flat surface of the silver tetradrachm coins.

While the fantastical mechanical creatures obviously provided Harryhausen and his directors with an opportunity to dazzle viewers with state-of-the-art special effects, the most common statuary vivification effects were achieved by simple mechanical or double exposure techniques, and represented the embodiment of a statue or icon by a deity—a *deus ex machina* of sorts. This is also in line with Greek mythology and culture, for, as was mentioned before, direct contact between humans and gods was problematic. The adoration of anthropomorphic icons, such as the hyperbolic sculptures of the Classical era, was a widespread phenomenon that saw statues painted, adorned with clothes, jewelry and spoken to. The painted figurehead in *Jason and the Argonauts* is a nice example of an iconic image that is used by a deity, in this case Hera, to remotely and covertly converse with her followers. As Steiner rightly points out, however, the sculpting of anthropomorphic icons was not unproblematic.<sup>30</sup> The art form posed some much-debated ethical dilemmas pertaining to the representation of the deities, who were, after all, immortal presences. While the statuary cult was obviously meant to bridge the gap between the Olympian rulers and the common people, it was also key to hold on to the gods' sublime aura. Steiner argues that an aniconic or semi-iconic approach was most respectful, and the proliferation of these representations in Greek cult practices certainly backs up the validity of this idea. Art historically, however, Greek sculptors decided on the human form rather early on, in a sense elevating and democratizing the sculptural body throughout the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic period. This was of course only true up to some point, for the evolution into hyperbolic or ide-



alized forms of sculpture separated the divine body from the mortal one, even though the gods were represented in a human form.

It was also in this way that divine sculpture was most often depicted on screen, usually modeled after the actor playing the part. In the 1981 *Clash of the Titans*, sculpture plays an especially important role in the story. The narrative is overseen by the gods in their foggy soft-focus Olympus—led by a campy Laurence Olivier as Zeus—and the earth is represented by a wall full of small clay figurines that stand for the characters of the story. The gods handle the figurines and manipulate them in a scaled amphitheater that symbolizes the arena of life. When King Acrisius of Argos/Donald Houston disrespects Zeus, the god of gods starts off by crushing Acrisius's clay figurine, killing him instantly, and then has Poseidon flood the city, killing (almost) everyone and bringing down the giant statue of Zeus that graced the city. The clay figurines pop up frequently in the story, as they serve to influence characters such as Calibos and Perseus. A more prominent role is reserved for the statue of the vengeful goddess Thetis, which is modeled after actress Maggie Smith. The statue of Thetis is portrayed in a Classical style and in keeping with its pictorial tradition, accompanied by a sea-horse and holding a small statue of the winged goddess Nike in her outstretched hand as a sign of victory. The statue is brought to life in the film through the superimposition of the goddess's face onto her image, as she secretly converses with the monstrous Calibos, but also makes her own head fall off in a fit of anger at Andromeda and Perseus's wedding and her severed head then goes off to threaten the couple.

*Clash of the Titans* also deals with another popular statuary trope concerning one of the most horrifyingly accidental sculptors in the whole of mythology, a monster whose petrifying gaze stood for instant mortification and whose hissing hairdo was quite successfully reproduced by Harryhausen's good modeling and beautiful stop motion photography in *Clash of the Titans*. The creature was a little less successfully reproduced in the Hammer horror film *The Gorgon* (Terence Fisher, 1964), with special thanks to its shabby make-up department; the 2010 *Clash of the Titans*, in which the digital gorgon was characterized by artificially fluid motion and poor facial detail; and *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: the Lightning Thief*, where she was even turned into a leather-clad, sunglasses-brandishing baddie with poorly animated CGI-hair, portrayed by Uma Thurman. Medusa is generally regarded to be one of three Gorgon sisters and the only mortal one. The Gorgons were described by Hesiod as monstrous sea creatures but also portrayed as winged female figures with tusks and large eyes in ancient Greek vase paintings. There are several origin stories for both the Gorgons in general and the Medusa specifically, but one of the most adhered to is that of Ovid, who describes Medusa as a fair young maiden who was violated by Poseidon in the temple of Athena. It was the jealous goddess Athena who then punished the beautiful Medusa by turning her hair into a nest of hissing snakes, making her so repulsive that anyone who looked at her would turn into stone. Medusa was later slain by Perseus, who cut off her head. As Garber and Vickers rightfully argue, the tension between the beautiful and the monstrous is inherent in the visual and literary representation of Medusa.<sup>31</sup> This is apparent art historically, where the Gorgon's portrayal ranges from barely human in its monstrosity to cursedly beautiful. The rich history of the Medusa is, however, fit for another paper altogether.

This paper was written in the context of a research project on the cinematic representation of artworks supervised by Steven Jacobs at the School of Arts, University College Ghent.

## Notes

- 1 Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 45.
- 2 The prototypical sculpted man is known as Adam across various religions.
- 3 Like all myths, this one, too, came to us in many shapes and sizes. It is most famously mentioned in Aesop's *Fables* (via Themistius and Phaedrus), Plato's *Protagoras*, Pseudo-Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Hesiod's *Works and Days*.
- 4 Cf. among others Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Homer's *Iliad*, Aesop's *Fables*, Pseudo-Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca*.
- 5 Deborah Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.21.
- 6 Ibid., p.19.
- 7 Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p.105.
- 8 Guy P.R. Métraux, *Sculptors and Physicians in Fifth-Century Greece: a Preliminary Study* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p.48.
- 9 Cf. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
- 10 Since Ovid, full name Publius Ovidius Naso, was a Roman poet, the goddess of love known as Aphrodite was called Venus.
- 11 Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in fifteen books. Translated by Mr. Dryden. Mr. Addison. ... and other eminent hands. Publish'd by Sir Samuel Garth, M.D. Adorn'd with sculptures. ... The third edition (Ann Arbor: Gale ECCO, 2007), p.343-344.
- 12 Harold Bloom, *George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion* (New York, New Haven & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p.88.
- 13 Though the museum only opened its doors to the public in 1775, it collected anatomical waxes by famed wax artist Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (1656-1701) that predate its grand opening by more than 70 years.
- 14 Pamela Pilbeam, *Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks* (London & New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), p.26.
- 15 Michelle E. Bloom, *Waxworks: A Cultural Obsession* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.124.
- 16 Alastair J.L. Blanshard & Kim Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), p.18.
- 17 "Les Films tels qu'ils sont" (Le Courrier Cinématographique n°12, 30 September 1911, p.16) in Alain Carou & Béatrice de Pastre (eds.), *Le Film d'Art & Les Films d'Art en Europe, 1908-1911* (1895 - n°56, December 2008, Paris: AFRHC), p.317.
- 18 "The Film of the Week," *Moving Picture World*, vol.8, (April 29, 1911), p.934.
- 19 *Moving Picture World*, vol. 20, (April-June 1914), p.772.
- 20 W. Stephen Bush, "Cabiria" in *Moving Picture World*, vol. 20, (April-June 1914), p.1090-1091.
- 21 Claude Aziza, "Le Péplum: l'Antiquité au Cinéma" in *CinémAction* n°89 (Condé-sur-Noireau: Editions Corlet, 1998), p.7.
- 22 Alastair J.L. Blanshard & Kim Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), p.36.
- 23 Ibid., p.58-59.
- 24 Michael G. Cornelius (ed.), *Of Muscles and Men* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2011) p.5.
- 25 Harryhausen would later patent his combination of special effects that created an exciting mix between live action and animation as "Dynamation."
- 26 This act of sculptural manifestation is called agalmatophany, which, along with the appearance of a god, or theophany, was not only common practice in Jason and the Argonauts, but also in Greek mythology. Gods were said to use statues as a go-between to communicate to mortals, for the latter would not be able to withstand the radiant presence of the actual deity. Deborah Tarn Steiner, *ibid.*, p.135.
- 27 Cf. Pseudo-Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca* and Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*.
- 28 George Grote, *A History of Greece: from the Earliest Period to the Close of the Generation Contemporary with Alexander the Great*, vol.5 (London: John Murray, 1870), p.58-59.
- 29 In spite of its rather medieval setting, *Your Highness* also features a Minotaur and a Hydra.
- 30 Deborah Tarn Steiner, *ibid.*, p.81-92.
- 31 Marjorie Garber & Nancy J. Vickers (eds.), *The Medusa Reader*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).



# I Know It When I See It

## MONA LISA ON THE MOVE

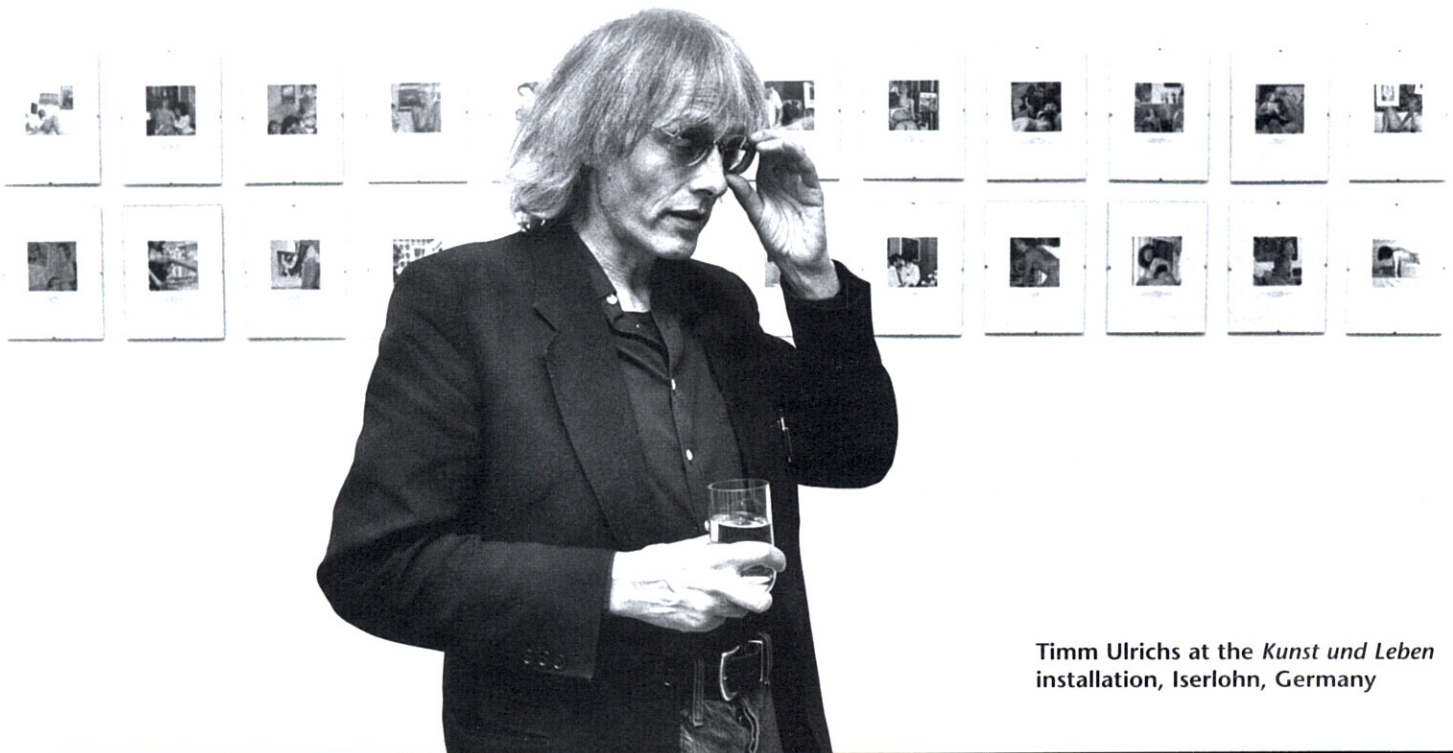
By KALANI MICHELL

**What kind of art do we find on the walls of our films? How does that affect our viewing of the same art in its museum context? What happens when the *Mona Lisa* suddenly becomes a moving image?**

In *Kunst und Leben*,<sup>1</sup> a 2012/13 installation of found and cropped film stills by the German conceptual artist Timm Ulrichs, *Mona Lisa* might get more than the standard fifteen-second glance to which she is accustomed in the Louvre.<sup>2</sup> We see her right away, visible in plate no. 4, but it takes time to acknowledge her. She is placed not in the center of the still, as we might expect, but rather at its edge. Part of her golden decorative frame is displaced; the entirety of her famous face is barely captured. Moreover, she is not the only attraction in the frame, but vies with several competitors for spectatorial attention: a mosaic *Coca Cola* lamp, a glass vase with flowers and two wine glasses on either side of it, a bent leg mostly concealed by a stocking, an unbuttoned flannel shirt revealing a hairless male chest, part of a jaw, and another smaller painting

across from *Mona Lisa* in the corner, most likely a still life of another vase with flowers. In this installation, *Mona Lisa* has become a moving image in more ways than one. She is an image that has moved to a different medial platform—a still—and Ulrichs also puts her image into motion by cropping this still. Whereas she might have been just another object in the background of the porn set, the way in which he reframes the still highlights her presence, moving her back into focus.

As with this recontextualization of *Mona Lisa*, spectators are likely to take a closer look at the other artworks found in the background of the remaining twenty-nine plates that constitute *Kunst und Leben*. The stills in this installation originate from pornographic magazines dating from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, which often accompanied the pornographic films. These still photographs were either produced exclusively for the purpose of the magazines, were shot before or after specific film scenes, or they were shot parallel to the film, a common practice that allowed pornographic production companies to maximize profits.<sup>3</sup> The imagery in these stills is related, but not identical to the filmic material itself. As Winfried Pauleit clarifies,



Timm Ulrichs at the *Kunst und Leben* installation, Iserlohn, Germany



even if stills are made during the recording of a film, they are, nevertheless, "shot from another camera angle and usually with different focal lengths and exposure times. In the strictest sense, one can only ever find similarities between filmic shots and film stills."<sup>4</sup> In 1978, when Ulrichs began collecting these stills, the magazines were his only way of accessing the pornographic material, as he didn't own a Super-8 projector.<sup>5</sup> The images have not been altered except for the precise cropping that highlights the 'found objects' in the set design—each still reveals a reproduction of a canonical work of art. Ulrichs' installation complicates the relationship between film and art not only by situating film stills in the museum, thereby inserting objects of film production and advertisement into the context of fine art, but also by looking for art in filmic environments, such as set designs, and playing with filmic conventions. In *Kunst und Leben*, Ulrichs employs and parodies the filmic practices that are so familiar from 'tasteful' Hollywood sex scenes: His cropped stills zoom in on objects, pan away from the sexual act and insist on interludes. At the same time, he plays with notions of canonicity. In the museum installation, the typical roles of the actors and set design are reversed. The bodies become the marginal elements, the "*Randbemerkungen*" as Ulrichs calls them, while the artwork, the object of the set design, is kept in clear sight.<sup>6</sup>

In the museum, as well as in the exhibition catalogue, these stills are arranged chronologically, replicating the conventions of art history anthologies, beginning with ancient Greek sculpture: a small reproduction of the *Venus de Milo* (c. 100 BCE). It moves through major developments in painting from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, such as Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Woman* (c. 1470), Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500-1505) and *Man with a Golden Helmet* (c. 1650), once attributed to Rembrandt. The catalogue then turns its attention to prominent painters characteristic of Romanticism and Post-Impressionism. In front of Caspar David Friedrich's famous moonrise there is a bare-breasted woman laughing, the two Tahitian women in a Paul

Gauguin painting are a backdrop for oral sex, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Jane Avril, kicking up and showcasing her leg*, is mocked by an actress lifting up and singling out her breast. It doesn't take long to realize that the paintings and the porn scenes are not randomly paired, but often interact with each other, exhibiting a similar narrative or sexual content, or a similar form. After scanning the porn sets with Friedrich, Gauguin and Lautrec, viewers might return, for example, to a painting in Vincent van Gogh's *The Langlois Bridge at Arles* series (1888) and find that the road alongside the canal begins to resemble in placement and structure the stretched back of one actress leaning over to fondle another. This survey of art history ends with works by the great masters of the twentieth century: Franz Marc's *Grazing Horses IV (The Red Horses)* (1911) in a woman-on-top scene; Wassily Kandinsky's *Painting with Black Arch* (1912) hanging next to a depiction of male-to-male fellatio; Pablo Picasso's *Three Musicians* (1921) appearing in black-and-white behind a breast and a hand; Salvador Dalí's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955) next to a couple in the reverse cowgirl position; and Andy Warhol's *Untitled from Marilyn Monroe (Marilyn)* (1967) on the floor behind a transsexual actor engaging in 'doggie-style' intercourse.

In these stills, Ulrichs freezes the bodies, usually the most important figures in the frame, watched primarily for their sexual movements—touching, moving, thrusting—and puts the paintings in motion. Viewers thus begin to think of the familiar artworks not as static entities confined to an institution in Paris, Berlin or Amsterdam. Rather, as reproductions, they circulate. *Kunst und Leben*, German for *art and life*, can be read as a metareflection on the blending of art and film, or the 'liveliness' of figures captured on celluloid and the 'stillness' of figures captured in paintings. Ulrichs' method of finding and collecting these stills proposes that there is something worthwhile in this methodology, that it can uncover more than just a familiar, canonical face. When the image including *Mona Lisa*, for instance, is cropped, she becomes as important to the composition of the set as the other actors around her; she is given the

*Kunst und Leben* installation view, Ingolstadt, Germany



Photo courtesy of Helmut Bauer



opportunity to speak and look back, to reveal and scrutinize the images, sets and films of which she has been a part. In *Kunst und Leben*, *Mona Lisa*'s presence begins to raise doubts about the categories of 'high' art and 'low' film, about the relationship between the stories told in paintings and the stories told on screen. Artworks that have been glorified in traditional accounts of art history suddenly take on sexual and deviant undertones. Films that have been considered crude and aesthetically uninteresting take on a new role in the trajectory of film history. While pornographic photography is estranged from its standard viewing location in *Kunst und Leben*, moving from the porn theater or the private space of the home into a museum in Ingolstadt, Germany, these works of art with a capital 'A' must also be experienced in a different way. They are no longer the only focal point in the museum, hanging in expensive frames inside a white cube, but are now 'merely' background objects. Film—especially this genre of film—is no longer watched for its climax or the unfolding of a scene, and art—especially this kind of art—is no longer an auratic object.

Focusing on the most famous painting in Ulrichs' collection can help flesh out these implications. The viewers crowding in front of *Mona Lisa* in Ingolstadt to get a snapshot with her do so for different reasons than those who are trying to take her picture in the Louvre. Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe regard the phenomenon of visitors flocking to see the *Mona Lisa* as an opportunity to broaden the common dichotomous understanding of the original and the reproduction, which becomes especially challenging when applied to the traditional arts of painting and sculpture: "If no copies of the *Mona Lisa* existed, would we pursue it with such energy? [...] The intensity of the search for the original [...] depends on the amount of passion triggered by its copies. No copies, no original."<sup>7</sup> Aura cannot be isolated to one version of the *Mona Lisa*, the small face hanging behind protective glass in the Louvre. Instead, per Latour and Lowe, aura is able to migrate to diverse facsimiles within the entire "trajectory" or "career" of this painting; aura exists because of "the whole assemblage made up of one—or several—original(s) together with its continually rewritten biography."<sup>8</sup> Instead of thinking of 'the work' of the *Mona Lisa* as a painting residing in Paris, it makes more sense to consider the work of art in terms of a performance, a constantly evolving set of technical, spatial and material conditions according to which reproductions are evaluated. When we view her, as the original or as a reproduction, we are engaging in a complex process of comparing and negotiating what we are seeing with the intertextual trajectory of her life as a canonical image.

Following the trajectory of *Mona Lisa* through the

Ingolstadt exhibition means approaching long-standing questions about the boundaries between artistic, pornographic and commercial images, as all of these types of images can be identified in the single still that Ulrichs extracts from a 1976 magazine and subsequently reframes. When we notice *Mona Lisa* on this porn set, we have to negotiate with at least one other symbol of commodity culture that strives to be an image: the *Coca Cola* lamp in imitation stained glass, whose dangling red tassels thematically fit in quite well with what is going on underneath. The cropping of the still highlights the proximity between the painted image and the commercial image. It could suggest that in the 1970s, when painting was becoming the 'old' but authoritative medium of the museum, reaffirming the publicly- and critically-accepted principles of the modernist aesthetic, there is not that much difference between *Coca Cola* kitsch and *Mona Lisa* kitsch.<sup>9</sup> With the intertwined bodies of the actors cut up and available only in the form of parts in this image, it might take a while to notice the phallus that is peeking up between the bent knee, itself an abbreviation of the sexual act. A line of sight is drawn by the knee, calling attention to the position of the actors fondling each other and the position of *Mona Lisa* on the wall, sitting upright and looking down upon the scene. While the pornographic production centers the frame of vision on the bodies themselves since, as Charles and Mirella Jona Affron explain, "of the two elements subject to photography, actor and décor, it is the human figure that is privileged in film," the cropped photograph turns its attention to the composition of the set.<sup>10</sup> It is interested in the woman who has traveled from her home institution in Paris and is, this time, not the one who is looked at, but the one doing the looking.

When considering what *Mona Lisa* represents in the cultural imaginary, the immediate physical properties that first come to

mind are her omniscient expression, with eyes that can follow spectators around the room, and her mysterious smile.<sup>11</sup> Over the years, these distinctive features have been greatly embellished, ultimately resulting in an anthropomorphization of the painted image. She is often rumored to be able to read one's secret thoughts and to know all about her spectator's affairs. She may even do so mockingly, reversing the traditional subject-object relationship, as it is *Mona Lisa* who now directly confronts, observes and judges her viewers.<sup>12</sup> This is definitely the case in the context of the painting in *Kunst und Leben*. As a work of art, *Mona Lisa* is more than an everyday prop that essentially functions as a paratextual device meant to help convey the film's time, location and atmosphere.<sup>13</sup> According to the Affrons, the objects of conventional set design



Leonardo da Vinci  
Mona Lisa (La Gioconda), 1503/05  
Öl auf Holz, 76,8 × 53 cm  
Musée national du Louvre, Paris



are specialized in the art of “not ‘intruding,’ in not ‘calling attention,’ in ‘remaining unobtrusive,’ in being ‘the director’s most faithful accomplice,’ in creating the good set.”<sup>14</sup> Although this could have been the intention for the *Mona Lisa* reproduction on the porn set, she has quite the opposite effect in the exhibition in Ingolstadt. In this context, she seems to want to tell the viewers about what she is witnessing down below. In a text about the prolific reproductions of *Mona Lisa*, Ulrichs is also interested in what she is able to see on the set: “Under the eyes of the smiling *Mona Lisa*—is it, in fact, an ordinary, forced or carefree smile?—all sorts of erotic games take place.”<sup>15</sup>

Thinking about this pornographic context might make us wonder: Is that why she is smiling? But this is not just any painting. This is the *Mona Lisa*, the figure with the all-knowing expression, and thus she sees far more than that which is immediately in front of her. Even in this layering of media environments—a porn set, a photographic still and an installation—her cultural and historical legacy allows her discerning eyes to see beyond the immediate objects of the set design. She’s not only smiling at the half-naked bodies on the porn set. She voyeuristically observes those bodies watching the pornographic images at home or in a theater, in which this is a mere still in a sequence of others. We might be tempted to ask: What does she watch them do? She also sees the bodies approaching the installation in the museum, in which this image hangs as one plate in a series of thirty. How does she look at the viewers of *Kunst und Leben*? Mockingly? Mischievously? When they experience her twice-removed—once from the Louvre, once from the genre production—in this different exhibition space, does she look forward to finding out how they react? With disgust, embarrassment or fascination?

Even though *Kunst und Leben* captures *Mona Lisa* during her time as a prop, this doesn’t necessarily mean that all of her museal qualities have vanished in this new context. Directly below the still there is some text which seems out of place.

**Leonardo da Vinci**

*Mona Lisa* (La Gioconda), 1503/05  
Öl auf Holz, 76,8 x 53 cm  
Musée national du Louvre, Paris

This illustration caption for *Mona Lisa* is nearly identical to the caption in the Louvre.<sup>16</sup> It lists the author of the portrait in bold, the title, year, materials and size of the work, as well as the institution and city in which ‘the original’ is currently located. According to the logic of its placement, the caption suggests that *Mona Lisa*, even if she’s on a porn set, continues to maintain a close relationship with her ‘home’ institution. It goes so far as to propose that this image, a photograph of a sex scene that has been selected, cropped and placed in a museum in Ingolstadt, Germany, is in fact ‘the’ *Mona Lisa*. The caption also insinuates that, at least in this context, there is more to ‘*Mona Lisa*’ than Leonardo’s sixteenth-century portrait. Part of *Mona Lisa* is also a symbol of popular culture (*Coca Cola*), a design strategy (the vase in the corner), other paintings (the still lifes), a sexual act (the bodies on the set) and other media (film and photography). A cluttered, tasteless bedroom should be associated with the *Mona Lisa*? Instead of citing his own name, the name of the photographer, or the name of the director, Ulrichs designates Leonardo da Vinci as part of the title, or possibly even as the title itself, emphasizing this in bold font. In addition to the layers of authorship being

appropriated and omitted here, the center of the photograph, that which conventionally brings the artwork into focus, remains hollow. It oscillates between the face of a renowned woman and the half-naked body of an unknown woman. What exactly is this ‘work,’ the entirety of which has been irreverently labeled and archived as the *Mona Lisa*? How are we to look at this image?

*Kunst und Leben* proposes that in order to better understand canonical paintings such as the *Mona Lisa*, one must move beyond the original/copy distinction, as Latour and Lowe emphasize: “A given work of art should be compared not to any isolated spring but to a catchment area, a river along with its estuaries, its tributaries, its rapids, its meanders and, of course, its several hidden sources.”<sup>17</sup> In order to begin the process of recognizing and exploring the many hidden sources that contribute to the “career” of an artwork, this installation departs from a single artistic reproduction in the background, which refuses to stay put. Although the nature of the prop calls for it to be quickly forgotten or not even initially noticed, Mark Rappaport claims that

**“once you really notice it, you can’t stop noticing it. [...] Sometimes connections [involving the set design] are made quite by accident. [...] One sees a film and one cannot, for whatever reason, forget a prop, or an artifact, or a doodad. And then one sees the same object in another film [...]. [...] Objects which are placed in a scene just to fill up space, begin to assume an importance they were never meant to have.”<sup>18</sup>**

This is a very different methodology for collecting and pairing films, one that cites, but works against, the schema of the four “basic film types” by narrowly focusing on one specific feature that these genre productions have in common.<sup>19</sup> This installation leaves its viewers contemplating relevant questions about the supposedly marginal elements in filmic contexts and about how films are typically collected, grouped and compared to one another. It is an experiment with the possibility of conceptualizing genre films in an unconventional way, suggesting that the “semantic” elements that Rick Altman identifies as constituting genre—the “list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like”—could indeed have an important, overlooked “syntactic,” or “secondary, textual” meaning.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the collection of images in this installation probes the potential of finding and promoting alternative forms of art and film history.

For some viewers, *Kunst und Leben* might even raise doubts about the films they believe to know so well. Have they been missing something important on the walls of their films all along? When *Mona Lisa* travels into filmic contexts, she is often meant to be immediately recognized and to stand out. This is the case when she appears in the title of the film itself: *Mona Lisa* (1968) directed by Werner Schroeter or the 1986 version directed by Neil Jordan, for example. But what happens when she shows up in a filmic context unexpectedly, discreetly appearing on a wall to observe a scene? Simply because the image of *Mona Lisa* is a re-make in these different medial environments does not necessarily mean that she loses her intimate relationship with vision. The reproductions and recontextualizations of *Mona Lisa* build upon the depiction and the rhetoric of vision that have contributed to her cultural iconicity. As a prop, she can function as an unforeseen informant, a fly on the wall





of set design, providing valuable insight into how art and film are collected, archived and curated. Suppose that we followed this line of thought and traced the props, or in this installation, the paintings, throughout their filmic travels—which films would we collect and sample along the way? How might this result in a productively different grouping of films than that which we might typically encounter? In our particular case: What might a very short film history of the *Mona Lisa* look like?

In William Castle's *Homicidal* (1961), *Mona Lisa*'s cinematic space is limited to barely a minute. It is late. A knock at the front door initiates the encounter. The lady of the house walks over, pulls back the curtains and peers through the window: "What do you want this time of night?" A soft, feminine voice replies: "We want to get married!" She opens the door to tell the young couple to come back in the morning and they can be married then. But the prim and proper blonde on the doorstep insists:

"We'll pay. Extra!"  
 "You sure got the money?"  
 "Oh yes, yes."  
 "Come on in, I'll see if he'll do it."

It is only when she fully opens the door that viewers get a quick glimpse of *Mona Lisa*. She watches the scene from the wall. From this position, she can spy on the Justice of the Peace while he is officiating. In this film about the construction of femininity and the dangers of disguising gender, *Mona Lisa* becomes a witness at a wedding and to a murder.

In another hallway three years later, *Mona Lisa* is again perfectly placed to peek over the shoulders of the actors and listen in on the action. At the end of Castle's *Strait-Jacket* (1964), she hears Carol /Diane Baker screaming in the background: "Thank God you're here, Michael. You have to stop her...She tried to kill me! She tried to kill us all!" Lucy /Joan Crawford hesitantly approaches Michael. Their two bodies frame the painting and, without any words, Lucy presents him with a mask—of herself. She holds it out in front of her for a moment, just below *Mona Lisa*'s face. As Ulrichs himself has stated:

**"No other artwork has ever been so closely intertwined with the 'motif' of the imposter and the forger, the master of disguise and transformation, the doppelgänger and the revenant as *Mona Lisa*. One can slip right into her skin and her mask—so easily, freely and beneficially."**<sup>21</sup>

Another twenty years later, *Mona Lisa* can be found in a more overtly sexual context. She hangs over the bed during the infamous introductory scene of Jean-Jacques Beineix's *37°2 le matin* (*Betty Blue*) (1986), which captures the climax of the sexual act in a single, slow zoom. But she also shares other moments with Betty /Béatrice Dalle and Zorg /Jean-Hugues Anglade, such as their first fight. Betty is throwing all of Zorg's things out of the window. Appliances. Trash. Boxes. "I'm going to straighten up your place. Bunch of shit! You'll see what I'm going to do with your fucking mess!" She reaches for a box beside his bed. "No, no, not that one, Betty." Now she is curious.



"What's so special about this one?" *Mona Lisa*—frameless, with tattered edges, precariously hung above the bed—is there for the moment when Betty discovers that Zorg is an author.

In these readings, the films are abbreviated and sampled according to the amount of screen time *Mona Lisa* receives. Whereas the viewers at the Louvre spend fifteen seconds with *Mona Lisa* because of the other objects in the museum space demanding their time, the fifteen seconds we spend with her here is determined by the filmic time. As Volker Pantenburg observes: "'Going to the movies' and 'visiting a museum' are subject to very different temporal agendas. In the cinema, temporality is prescribed by the duration of the film, whereas the temporal calculations of a visit to an exhibition are mostly made independently of the time required to actually see the works."<sup>22</sup> When paintings are encountered in film, there are at least three temporalities simultaneously at work: There is the notion of time represented in the painting itself, the implied amount of time that the film's characters spend in the presence of the painting and the amount of time that the film shows these characters in the presence of the painting. A painting in a filmic context can serve as an indicator of medial difference, drawing attention to the particularities of the pictorial space and time of the painting versus the cinematic space and time in which it is remediated. It can, on the other hand, encourage potential connections between these medial spaces and times that usually remain isolated from one another.<sup>23</sup>

The notion of different medial temporalities is also important for the understanding of *Kunst und Leben*. Although the stills originate from filmic and photographic contexts, the captions underneath the stills—e.g., "**Leonardo da Vinci** [...] Musée national du Louvre, Paris"—seek to return the reproduced artworks to the spatiotemporal context of the home institution from a refocused perspective. With the help of the cropped image, *Mona Lisa* is now back in the picture. With the help of the caption, she is now back in the realm of the Louvre. *Kunst und Leben* then tests the hold that this grand museum has on the still, bringing together the time regimes of the Louvre, the porn set and the Ingolstadt exhibition, all to which *Mona Lisa* is subject. In Paris, *Mona Lisa* is the main attraction, but once she is 'seen' (whatever that means), viewers tend to move on. In Ingolstadt, and in this short film history, viewers are given another chance to spend time with her, presumably without being pushed out of the way by other eager viewers. These contexts call attention to the numerous "careers" she has had as a 'copy' in an array of settings. How, then, do these experiences of a reinscription of famous places, names and works compare and relate to 'the' Louvre, to 'Leonardo' and to 'the' *Mona Lisa*?

These concerns about the location, author and experience of 'the' *Mona Lisa* are implicated in what Michel Foucault calls the problem of defining 'the work'. When Ulrichs titles each of the plates in *Kunst und Leben* after a famous artist, he is essentially thematizing the problematic "author function" that Foucault describes: Bestowing a proper name upon a 'work' of art is meant to

circulation and functioning of certain discourses within a society."<sup>24</sup>

Foregrounding the author-name is a way of limiting the scope and the possibility of a work, and Ulrichs plays with this idea when he returns to 'the origin' of the work in his captions. If the author is, according to Foucault, "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction," if the author "is the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning," then *Kunst und Leben* directly confronts this fear.<sup>25</sup> It tests the expectation of the name. Can a 'work' be held down, contained and controlled by an artist's name? What about the work that he classifies as **Leonardo da Vinci**? With the author-name in bold, Ulrichs provocatively proposes that the entire image of this still, the complete visual context of these bare bodies and the *Mona Lisa* reproduction, is, according to the logic of the author function, part of what constitutes the discourse on this celebrated Renaissance artist.

It should be mentioned that not all of the sets in *Kunst und Leben* appear as choreographed as they do in this still featuring *Mona Lisa*. Some stills seem to stress the contrast between the spontaneous snapshot of the actors, perhaps in the middle of a scene, and the finished product hanging on the wall. They can mark the difference between the well-known name of the painter and the other medial affiliations—theatrical, cinematic—that the still image of the set evokes. As Steven Jacobs describes, the introduction of a still photographer on the set of a film can present certain challenges to the overall conception of the work in motion: "Instead of acting, actors [are often] made to pose. Since the art of film acting is above all the art of movement, stills could deprive the actors of their métier."<sup>26</sup> Even so, recent historical studies of pornographic media have been careful to emphasize that porn is not—never has been and never will be—just film. Still images have always been central to the genre.<sup>27</sup> In Ulrichs' collection, the stills range from displaying a clear compositional logic to others with arrangements that appear random and out of place. Whereas the orgy in **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec** in front of *Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant in his Cabaret* (1892) and photographs of Marlene Dietrich and Humphrey Bogart position the body parts to look like cogs in a well-oiled machine, other stills don't seem as calculated. In **Wassily Kandinsky**, the lighting on the set produces a distracting shadow on the yellow 1970s wallpaper of the man standing next to *Painting with Black Arch* (1912). Unlike the actors in the orgy, whose heads are thrown back in staged moments of pleasure, he looks directly and apathetically into the camera while he receives a blow job from an actor whose profile is only just visible at the bottom of the cropped still.

In this generic corpus, one can find expected as well as awkward bodily poses, camera angles which clearly capture the sexual act and those which seem rather lost, and characters who look blissfully unaware and others who appear to seek direction from behind the lens of the camera. This range of compositional styles within the stills makes clear that, rather than documenting film itself, the film as object, this installation is an investigation of film as a set of practices that involves props, directions, lighting and staging techniques. While some stills in *Kunst und Leben* clearly have a spontaneous feel to

"permit one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. [...] [I]t establishes a relationship among the texts. [...] The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence,



them, a 'liveliness' perhaps, others can appear quite painterly, or theatrical, photographic or cinematic. As a result, we might notice similarities in the still titled **Wassily Kandinsky** between the three primary shapes in the abstract *Painting with Black Arch* and the shape of the bodies on the set. Or, when we spot other entertainers, Dietrich and Bogart, next to the image of the singer Aristide Bruant in **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec**, we could contemplate the poster, the portrait photograph and the body as media that have historically reinforced the star system. We might rethink the sexual undertones of the "bridge" in **Vincent van Gogh**, or perhaps we will reassess the status of the most famous painting today in **Leonardo da Vinci**. *Mona Lisa* has been an object of fascination long before the development of digital media allowed her image to be more easily transferred, reproduced and manipulated. And yet, every day thousands of visitors crowd in front of her, trying to hold their cell phones steady for a just a few seconds so they can indexically prove that they were there, in her presence, and digitally capture the face they seem to know all too well. This still makes us reconsider what it means to be 'in her presence' and whether we really 'know' this painting, or even this genre of film, when we see it.

When U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart uttered the now infamous phrase—"I know it when I see it"—he was referring to the difference between films that he would define as obscene, i.e. hard-core pornographic films, and *Les Amants* (1958), the art film on trial in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* in 1964.<sup>28</sup> Since then, this phrase has become a common means of expressing the problem of genre definitions and generic categorizations: How do we know 'this type' of art or 'that type' of film when we see it? Besides referring to the boundaries, or lack thereof, between art and porn (a possibility that, at present, doesn't seem that scandalous anymore), this phrase also designates the way in which many of us still attempt to describe supposedly self-explanatory genres and media. At the beginning of his book on television genres, Jason Mittell recalls this same phrase that aptly expresses our belief in scopic knowledge, writing that "[g]enres are so common throughout various arenas of cultural practice that their definitions can often seem like givens—we all agree upon a basic understanding of what a sitcom is, so no further elaboration is needed."<sup>29</sup> In *Kunst und Leben*, films are collected not by what we would typically notice and identify as representative of a porno flick, but according to what we overlook. If we give these genre films another look, there might be further ways of defining and differentiating them from each other. In turn, the art historical canon is dismantled and reassembled in this installation, making us aware of the discursive, institutional and medial contexts in which we frequently encounter the paintings we purport to know. Collecting artworks and films according to another logic could yield surprising results.

We could return, for example, to our brief experiment with collecting films differently—using *Mona Lisa* as a prop to bring together snippets from two films from the 1960s directed by William Castle and a French cult classic. These are, indeed, somewhat random and surprising connections, and it could be claimed that an absolute, stable meaning fails to reveal itself as a result of making them. But we can also ask: What do we notice in this reediting of the films that we didn't notice before? Reflecting on the ways in which films are deconstructed, reanimated and rediscovered today on viewing platforms such as YouTube, do we find that certain scenes are imbued

with new meaning? It shouldn't be overlooked that these connections originate from a method of doing film history that is not bound to customary temporal, generic or national orders. Giuliana Bruno acknowledges that

"[c]onventional film history, in general, is more time-than space-bound. It moves diachronically, progressing from period to period, and provides an essentially temporal history of the medium. Space emerges, for the most part, only in accounts of national cinemas, and in a reductive way that tends to confine itself within the borders of particular states. Interesting relations emerge, however, when one tries to break the teleology of time and the cartography of nationhood to organize filmic movements instead around travel through the durational layers of space and spatiotemporal fragments of dwelling."<sup>30</sup>

When Ulrichs brings together thirty stills in Ingolstadt, he experiments with a different ordering principle for genre productions. It recommends a more nuanced understanding of canonical art today, one that is situated in the realm of performance rather than painting, urging viewers to take seriously all the hidden and deviant paths that are part of the life of a work.<sup>31</sup> It's not only fun to follow art objects throughout their travels or to look for them as found objects, secretly observing a scene on the walls of our films. It also encourages us to reflect on the way in which films have been historically categorized, grouped together and excluded from one another, presenting alternative possibilities for doing film history in the future.

By following the paintings along their alternative careers as props, viewers become privileged to new kinds of experiences and perspectives—from the hallway and from the bedroom. When *Mona Lisa* and the other 29 artworks in *Kunst und Leben* meet up in Ingolstadt, they bring with them their stories about being an artistic reproduction on a film set or in a filmic context. They observe what goes on around them in the museum, as well as what occurs in the other stills beside them. Thus, as Rappaport proposes, "let us imagine another scenario: the secret lives of objects. [...] What do the props in the prop shop say to each other about the movies they were in once the doors are closed?"<sup>32</sup> What would *Mona Lisa* say to the artworks in the other 29 stills after hearing about the differences in their sets, histories and recorded moments? After the museum closes, they might discuss

"which movies they were in, how close they were to the camera, how prominent in the frame, how long they were on screen. They compare notes, they tell each other stories about the hilarious and awful things that happened on their sets. They gossip about the stars and the directors. They brag to one another about their pedigrees and credits, their shining moments, and their favourite films. Which actors they liked working with, who were the best cameramen and lighting technicians, the times they were almost dropped and smashed to smithereens, or overlooked completely. Apartments and sets I appeared in and which famous actors and actresses fondled me, or manhandled me, or glanced admiringly at me, or ignored me completely."<sup>33</sup>



In the same vein as Arlene Raven's anthropomorphizing of *Mona Lisa* in *Travels with Mona* (1977-78), imagining, even just for a moment, what *Mona Lisa* might say about her secret life as an artistic reproduction is not simply a way of ridiculing the conventions of 'high art'. As Raven shows, it can help one truly think about *Mona Lisa*'s status today as a canonical work of art, her travels around the world as a reproduction and the prolific manipulations of her image.<sup>34</sup> This strategy allows one to better understand the issue of circulation that is central to her existence as an art object that we, the viewing public, continue to recognize and imbue with meaning. Especially at this moment in time when the art world is buzzing about the prospect of finding out that the Isleworth and the Prado *Mona Lisas* actually predate—i.e., dislodge and unsettle—the 'original' *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, our brief travels with Mona in this paper might remind us about all the stories and adventures waiting to be told by her 'copies'.<sup>35</sup> Although the secret lives of objects are fragmented realities which we, as viewers, perhaps would rather ignore or repress, as they threaten to demystify the underlying logic and therefore the magic, mystery and illusion of 'the work', they can in fact enrich the experience of it and make it more mysterious, leaving us more intrigued than concerned when we have to announce that, once and for all, we do not 'know' it when we 'see' it.

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## Notes

- 1 The installation *Kunst und Leben* was on view as part of the exhibition Timm Ulrichs. *Bilder-Finder—Bild-Erfinder* at the Museum für Konkrete Kunst in Ingolstadt, Germany from December 2, 2012 to February 24, 2013. The stills were hung up in three rows, with each row containing ten stills. They were ordered chronologically, proceeding from left to right, according to the dates of the reproduced artworks in the background. The exhibition catalogue individually documenting the thirty stills, which was published in conjunction with a 1993 installation of *Kunst und Leben*, is also ordered according to this logic. The plate numbers in this paper thus refer to this chronological sequence of the stills. Different series of *Kunst und Leben* have been on show at the Kunstverein Hannover (1981), the Sprengel Museum (1991), the Museum für das Fürstentum Lüneburg (1992), the Städtische Galerie "die welle" in Iserlohn (1993) and as part of the Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain in Paris (2010).
- 2 James Elkins, "How Long Does it Take To Look at a Painting?" (*James Elkins Art Blog*) *Huffington Post* (Nov. 6, 2010), accessed Sept. 13, 2011, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-elkins/how-long-does-it-take-to-look-at-a-painting-2010-11-06>.
- 3 For quality reasons, it is unlikely that these stills were extracted and enlarged from the film strip itself. See Steven Jacobs, "The History and Aesthetics of the Classical Film Still," *History of Photography* 34, no. 4 (2010), 373 and Winfried Pauleit, *Filmstandbilder. Passagen zwischen Kunst und Kino* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld Verlag, 2004), 25-27.
- 4 Pauleit, 26; my translation.
- 5 Timm Ulrichs, in discussion with the author, June 20, 2013, Berlin, Germany.
- 6 Siegfried Barth, "Wie Porno-Queen Teresa Orlowski dem Kunstbegriff des Professors entging: Timm Ulrichs und sein lustvolles Museum," in Timm Ulrichs: *Kunst und Leben* (Iserlohn: Kulturamt der Stadt Iserlohn, 1993). "Flaring nostrils, moaning lips, maybe a nipple—these are allowed to interrupt the image as marginal elements [*Randbemerkungen*]" (ibid., 2; my translation).
- 7 Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, "The Migration of the Aura, or How to Explore the Original through Its Facsimiles," in *Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, ed. Thomas Bartscherer and Roderick Coover (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 277-78.
- 8 Ibid., 278.
- 9 See Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT, 1989).
- 10 Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 35.
- 11 See Donald Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World's Most Famous Painting* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001). Sassoon devotes a significant portion of this book to the discussion of *Mona Lisa*'s "mysterious" smile and also comments on the myth surrounding her gaze (ibid., 207).
- 12 Ibid., 113-115.
- 13 See Affron and Affron, 37.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Timm Ulrichs, "Mona Lisa, 2x klingeln: Anmerkungen über zeitgenössische Versuche, eine Scheinlebende zum Tode zu erwecken," *Kunstforum International* 31 (1979), 131; my translation.
- 16 The caption in the Louvre is slightly different, as it lists these features of the work in multiple languages and includes inventory notes. See Musée du Louvre, "Portrait de Lisa Gherardini, épouse de Francesco del Giocondo," accessed Oct. 5, 2011, <http://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/portrait-de-lisa-gherardini-epouse-de-francesco-del-giocondo>.
- 17 Latour and Lowe, 278.
- 18 Mark Rappaport, "The Secret Life of Objects," *Rouge* (2009), accessed Oct. 17, 2011, <http://www.rouge.com.au/13/secret.html>.
- 19 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "Part Three: Types of Films," *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004). Cf. Rembert Hueser, "Finding Openings with Opening Credits," in *Media, Culture, and Mediality: New Insights into the Current State of Research*, ed. Ludwig Jäger, Erika Linz and Irmela Schneider (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010). Hueser suggests that "[t]o this day, film history is the history of feature films. [...] [I]t seems about time to begin to think about moving images in constellations that are flexible enough to reflect on how the distinctions that we make about them come into being in the very first place" (307; 309).
- 20 Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 31; 38. *Kunst und Leben* proposes that the semantic—i.e., the props in the set design—can always intrude upon the syntactic, a nuanced view of genre construction that Altman also supports (ibid., 36).
- 21 Ulrichs, "Mona Lisa, 2x klingeln," 79; my translation.
- 22 Volker Pantenburg, "1970 and Beyond: Experimental Cinema and Installation Art," in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, ed. Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg and Simon Rothöhler (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and SYNEMA – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012), 84.
- 23 See Katharina Sykora, *As You Desire Me: Das Bildnis im Film* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), 19-20.
- 24 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Random House, 1984), 107-108.
- 25 Ibid., 119.
- 26 Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 131.
- 27 See, for instance, Deborah Shamoan, "Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers: The Pleasure of Japanese Pornographic Comics for Women," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 77-78.
- 28 As quoted in Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 319 n. 9.
- 29 Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
- 30 Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), 361. See also Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 30.
- 31 Latour and Lowe, 280-81.
- 32 Rappaport.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Suzanne Lacy, *Travels with Mona, 1977-78*. Performance and postcard travelogue with text by Arlene Raven. See "Travels with Mona," *Critical Matrix: The Princeton Journal of Women, Gender and Culture* 17 (Spring 2008), 31-41.
- 35 See two articles by Martin Bailey: "Was Isleworth Mona Lisa Painted before the Louvre's Version?" *The Art Newspaper* (Mar. 26, 2013), accessed Apr. 1, 2013, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Was-Isleworth-Mona-Lisa-painted-before-the-Louvres-version/29138> and "Earliest Copy of Mona Lisa Found in Prado," *The Art Newspaper* (Feb. 1, 2012), accessed Feb. 28, 2013, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Earliest-copy-of-Mona-Lisa-found-in-Prado/25514>.



# The Aesthetics of Slaughter

LEVIATHAN IN CONTEXT

By ALLAN MACINNIS

Michael Glawogger's 2005 film *Workingman's Death* is one of the more striking films to depict the workings of a slaughterhouse. Though the documentary takes on various hellish working conditions, the centerpiece is a sequence shot at a Nigerian open-air marketplace / abattoir. There, workers and customers happily socialize and haggle whilst cows and goats, throats slit, bleed out into the dirt. Workers haul the heads, skins, and meat of slaughtered animals through crowds, over blood-soaked mud; no one reacts with horror. Nowhere is the western desire to deny or sanitize death and suffering in evidence; in fact, quite a different attitude towards animal death applies. As Glawogger explains on the commentary:

**The slaughtering in the culture of Nigeria is something very normal and simple, and they wouldn't even like to buy the meat when they didn't see the**

**cow. They wouldn't like—they wouldn't even do it—to buy the goat when they don't see the lively goat, and when they don't see the goat was healthy and the goat was worth buying.<sup>1</sup>**

These attitudes are remarkably different from the prevailing ones in North America, where, as animal liberation advocate Peter Singer puts it, meat is presented in "neat plastic packages," as the "culmination of a long process, of which all but the end product is delicately screened from our eyes."<sup>2</sup> The unfamiliarity of Glawogger's images, and the challenge they present to the viewer to honestly, openly embrace (or at least acknowledge) the animal suffering that goes into the production of meat, lend them a fascination that would likely be lacking in a film produced with more polemical intent. There is, as Glawogger puts it, "a strange mixture of brutality and beauty" to the footage, which makes it "watchable" and "gripping," "because I'm never tired to see that... I always see something

*Workingman's Death*





new in it. It opens my thoughts.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a response quite different from the one engendered by the sort of films produced by animal rights activists to horrify the viewer into swearing off the eating of meat. Such films do not seek to open thoughts but to produce a desired effect, and have generally not been received as cinema; but there is a growing body of films like Glawogger's which are almost as bloody in seeking to show the reality behind the “neat plastic packages” of the grocery store. While equally aimed at breaking down barriers of denial, such films often have a dispassionate or aestheticizing quality to them, which allows the viewer space to contemplate the realities at hand from some safe distance. Such is the case with the first classic of the form, Georges Franju's 1949 documentary *Blood of the Beasts*, reportedly shot in black and white because the director felt that showing such images in colour would be “too much to take.”<sup>4</sup> While a harrowing experience to anyone unaccustomed to images of slaughter, the film need not lead viewers to the conclusion that “meat is murder”; it simply refuses to allow them to lie to themselves about how meat is produced.

Often in these films—as is the case with Franju's, with Frederick Wiseman's *Meat* (1976), or with Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1978 film *In A Year With 13 Moons*—social criticism is intended, but this criticism is aimed at targets larger than the abattoir per se. *Meat* depicts both animals and workers as pawns in a relentless human institution that is indifferent to the feelings of both, connecting the film to Wiseman's other documentaries on North American institutions. Writing on the Fassbinder film, Ronald Hayman notes that its slaughterhouse sequence “is both a piece of cruelty to the audience and a statement about human cruelty,” which will serve to call to mind concentration camps later in the film.<sup>5</sup> Concentration camps were also seen as an unobvious subtext to the Franju film, our inhumanity to animals standing as a cipher for our inhumanity to fellow humans.

A more recent German documentary, which takes in both meat production and contemporary agribusiness, *Our Daily Bread* (Nikolaus Geyrhalt, 2005) strives to trouble the viewer with the alienated and alienating conditions and technology that animals and workers face, but with more of an aesthetic than political motivation. One watches the film, not in horror, but fascination, marveling at the bizarre tableaux presented, which seem more the stuff of science fiction than daily life.

*Leviathan*, the newest major film to take on the suffering of animals in the production of food – and arguably the first to substantially treat the suffering of humans caught up in the grueling physical labour required<sup>6</sup>—also has Glawogger's “strange mixture of brutality and beauty.” This makes it compelling and repeatedly watchable, despite the difficulty of some of its images. It has been likened, like *Our Daily Bread*, to science fiction and, indeed, horror cinema—what might be glibly dubbed torture porn for fish. Shot on and around a trawler off the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts, the former whaling town from which the Pequod departed in *Moby Dick*, the aestheticizing element in the film has much to do with the innovative technology employed by directors Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Labs. Eschewing narration, and shot using miniature Go Pro sports cameras, incorporating footage shot by the subjects themselves, and containing moments where the camera floats, apparently free of all control, among dead fish, the film has the excitement of the new to it. It is clearly an innovative and inti-

mate approach to its subject matter. Almost all of the ample writing on the film to date features a pun on the term “immersive”, referring both to the amount of time the camera spends either on or beneath the surface of the water, and to the narration-free immediacy of the film's images, which transform a mundane, much-filmed activity—industrial fishing—into something apocalyptic and unfamiliar.<sup>7</sup>

While animal suffering is very much in evidence in *Leviathan*—from the bulging, dead eyes of fish hauled from the depths to the gasping catch dying of suffocation on the ship's deck—there is also a strange humour to the film, and a greater degree of compassion for the fishermen than one might expect. Both qualities are in evidence in a sequence where one of the fishermen nods off while watching a reality-TV show about fishing. The scene is presented in a lengthy, static shot which itself may lull viewers towards sleep, only to suddenly realize that they have become a mirror image for the blinking, nodding, exhausted fisherman slumped on the opposite side of the screen. Unsettling as *Leviathan's* images may be, the film is no mere polemic, though it would be entirely reasonable to swear off eating fish after seeing it.

Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel spoke to me from Boston, on a speakerphone hookup so both filmmakers could react to questions, prior to a Vancouver screening of *Leviathan*. Thanks to the *Georgia Straight*, which previously ran a greatly abbreviated version of this interview, and to Steve Chow and Jasmine Pauk, for facilitating it.

**Allan:** Congratulations on the reception that *Leviathan* has received. It seems to really be striking a chord with critics. I'm curious if it's exceeded your expectations?

**Véréna:** I don't think we had any expectations.

**Lucien:** We had no idea what to expect.

**Véréna:** We were hoping that the fishermen would like the film, but...

**Lucien:** ...we didn't know what anybody else would think.

**Allan:** Were the fishermen wary, thinking you might be making an eco-horror doc along the lines of *The End of the Line*?<sup>8</sup>

**Lucien:** I think, before they got to know us. Fishermen feel marginalized and scapegoated and blamed for the lack of sustainability of fish stocks. The cause is really poor regulation on the part of different governments, more than it is the fishermen themselves. But once they got to know us—they're engaged in this really grueling activity out at sea, and I think they were happy to have a couple of greenhorns along to give them something different for a few voyages.

**Allan:** Did they enjoy your “greenness”? I gather both of you got sick, and that Véréna—you were sort of battered about and had to be hospitalized a couple of times?

**Véréna:** (laughs): Yeah!

**Allan:** How were they with that? Amused, supportive?

**Véréna:** I don't know. Not amused... I think when I was really in bad shape I was trying to be very discreet about it. But no, they were not amused. The captain didn't seem really concerned, but he was helping – giving me some medication to soothe my pain... I was expecting them to be more amused by Lucien being seasick, but actually they were kind with that too, and completely understanding, because some of them, even





after long years of being a fishermen, some of them are still seasick, and they know how hard it was and how painful it is, so they were very understanding with us.

**Allan:** Did you have any preconceptions of what the fishermen would be like, and were they changed by being on the boat with them?

**Véréna:** No, we discussed with them before, and we met them when the boat was at dock. So we didn't know what to expect, but we had a couple of conversations with the captain, and we had some agreement that if something happened to us, he wouldn't go back on land for us... so we knew that it was a rough environment, a labour-intensive environment. I think we were intellectually ready for that. I don't know if physically we were that ready for that, but we went through with it.

**Allan:** Did you have ecological themes in mind when you began? I gather the film changed a lot, that you had previously shot 50 hours of footage on land, which you didn't use - that the film was radically transformed by the experience of going out to sea. I wonder how much of what we see emerged from ideas you had before you set out on the ship, and how much of what we see comes entirely from the experience...?

**Véréna:** I think we didn't have any preconceived idea! Maybe something more beyond the image... I think the whole film comes from our experience at sea. And the only conceptual criteria that we had before was to share the camera with the fishermen, or a very small idea about how we could film when we were on the boat. We were basically projecting things, but it was more like we wanted to do a film where there was a real engagement with them and they're also engaged in the film and in filming with us and in sharing ideas with us. It was more this kind of idea that we had rather than having a preconceived idea of the visuals, how it would look like... so the aesthetic came out of the experience, the fear, the engagement of being

at sea in the middle of the Atlantic.

**Lucien:** I would certainly agree with everything that Véréna just said, but we had a negative preconception, we tried to work without preconceptions. We tried to do everything while we were doing the filming, rather than vetting a subject beforehand and knowing what we wanted to say about it. So we were discovering as we went along, and the most powerful experiences we had were indeed the ones we had on the boat, rather than on land. There's no profession that has been more filmed and more photographed than fishing, since the beginning of photography, since the beginning of cinema, and if we were going to make yet another film about fishing, we didn't want to do another romantic portrait of fishing, or a typical kind of liberal PBS TV-documentary portraying different constituencies as victims of X, Y, and Z. We wanted a different kind of experience and a different kind of film, but we didn't know what that would be like until we were out on the boat filming.

**Allan:** Maybe it's my own preconceptions that are at work here, but... I sort of imagine that two Harvard professors, and a group of fishermen, there was a class divide...?

**Lucien:** We're not trying to be defensive about this, but even the lowliest deckhand takes home more money at the end of the year than a salaried professor, at least at our level at Harvard does. So the class differences—there are differences of class and differences of culture and of nation, and certainly gender, for Véréna—but the class differences aren't as pronounced as one might imagine, per se. Also, the fishermen are intellectuals - in different ways, and in different degrees, but they know more about their world and the political economy of fishing and how that's changed over the last half-century than we will ever know, no matter how much research we do. We didn't have much to teach them, they had a hell of a lot to teach us...!

**Allan:** Am I correct that your family background involved fishing?





**Lucien:** Not really! My background was in shipping; my father was a boat-builder. I went fishing as a kid, but not industrial fishing. Véréna used to go diving with her father; he was a scuba-diver. So we both have different relationships with the ocean. We wanted to do something local, to do something close to Boston; we were fed up with having to travel great distances, and we were interested in doing something that related to our autobiographical experience, but not in any direct way.

**Allan:** Do you both eat meat and fish...?

**Véréna:** Raw meat and raw fish! (Laughs).

**Allan:** Raw meat?

**Lucien:** We eat more fish than the fishermen do, we can tell you that much!

**Allan:** I'm also a meat-eater, but I've always found slaughterhouse footage fascinating, in films like *Blood of the Beasts* or *Workingman's Death*, because we're looking at images that are suppressed, unseen, getting behind the denial of death in our culture... I found the images on the "killing floor" of the fishing boat quite remarkable for that reason, where we're swirling about with the guts and the fish heads. I found that really exciting to see, cinematically. I don't really understand my excitement at that—I feel like I should be horrified, but cinematically, it's so new and fresh...

**Lucien:** I don't know if anyone else has suggested *Workingman's Death* as a connection before. Certainly we've read a few reviews that mention Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* and Stan Brakhage's films. It's not that we're trying to disavow any influences, but as we were filming, other than trying not to make a film like these ones we imagined, we weren't thinking of abattoir films, slaughterhouse films, we weren't even thinking of Stan Brakhage or particular styles that we were either mimicking or avoiding in that regard. The references make

sense to us after the fact, but none of them were conscious influences at all.

**Allan:** How much control did you have over the Go Pro cameras? I know you had them attached to things, but some sequences are really chaotic and seem to suggest the cameras are entirely set free, as when it streams behind the boat with the seagulls...

**Lucien:** I would say that there are three or three and a half different kinds of footage shot with those cameras. One is a series of four shots, spread throughout the film, where the cameras were attached to a tripod or to a stable part of the boat, such as the shot from the top of the mast that you get two thirds of the way through the film, looking down on the boat. There were only four shots that weren't either hand-held by us or attached to a body. So the first kind was four short shots; the other kind was the shots that were attached to the fishermen's bodies. Mostly to their heads, like miner's lamps, but also to their wrists or their chests. And in that we didn't have any direct control. Obviously we attached them to their heads because we were interested in what that footage would look like, we had some idea as to what it might look like, but it wasn't until we started looking at it that we realized how arresting and interesting we thought it was. And then we kept on giving them the cameras to get similar kinds of footage. And then, of the footage that was hand held by us, either we were holding the camera literally with our hands, or we put it on the end of a boom, which is just like a fancy word in our case just for a basic 2X2 — or else two pieces of wood strapped together so we could hold it, up to about sixteen feet away from our arms' length. And that could either go underwater or above water, within the same shot. And with those shots—I would say there are differences of degree, not kind; we couldn't look directly through the viewfinder, but it was also true, when we were hand-holding the shots, that these Go Pro cameras didn't have



an LCD screen on the back, so we were just imagining what we were filming. You could say that it's a further stretch of the imagination when it's at the end of a stick. But we were also downloading the footage and looking at the footage and realizing what was interesting to us, and so on. Véréna, you put it very well when you said that one films more with one's body, in some literal sense, than merely with one's eye.

**Allan:** Were you surprised at some of the footage you got? Was there anything you repeated, that you looked at and thought it had promise and tried again, having a better idea what it might look like? Second takes?

**Lucien:** I would say yes and no. We never asked anyone to do anything again. We don't "direct" the people or script stuff in that way, but because we were looking at it and looking at it, we were constantly surprised about stuff, and bored by stuff, and fascinated by stuff, and anything that intrigued us, but we thought could be rendered more interesting yet, or made more peculiar or unfamiliar yet, we pushed, and we filmed it again.

**Véréna:** Or we would look at our footage and, being surprised at how arresting the images were when the fishermen were wearing the cameras at night, for instance, we would ask them, "Could you pick up the camera when you next go out?", this kind of thing. But to go back to the topic of control, there is a degree of control, when you are directing, even being from your body—even if you don't look through the viewfinder, you feel what you are doing, and you kind of direct it. If you want the camera being under water at that moment, and then above water the next, you have a kind of control, even if you don't know exactly what will be on the image.

**Allan:** So for example, the seagull sequence, you were turning the boards so that the camera would go under water, or above...? There's actually a gestural component to those shots, it's not just the board spinning free behind the boat?

**Véréna:** Yeah, it's controlled by us.

**Lucien:** You can say that it's directed in that way, in that we were trying to control it, but we were never able *totally* to control it. Even if we weren't on a boat—even if the sea was flat and the boat wasn't moving, you never can predict what happens precisely in front of the camera, and then with the boat lurching around as it was in high seas like that, even when we were filming on deck, close up to the fish, or close up to the fishermen, we never knew exactly what was going to happen. Often we never knew at all what was going to happen. And that was even more true when, in order to film (with the camera) on the stick with the seagulls, one of us would have to hold on to the other who would then be holding onto the stick, and you couldn't anticipate when the waves were going to come, or how big they were, and we couldn't always resist the power of the water slushing by... so we were trying to control it, but the resulting image is a combination of intent and accident.

**Allan:** Was there anything too chaotic, stuff that was unwatchable? The film seems to really push the boundaries, at times, of what the human mind can process as information. Some sequences are really alienating and shocking. Beautiful, but it's surprising that they make as much sense as they do.

**Véréna:** Hmm. We never had this question...

**Lucien:** There's loads of stuff that we rejected, for various reasons, conscious and unconscious. Whether we rejected stuff

because it was too chaotic, I'm not sure. In addition to putting a camera on the end of the stick, and attaching it to fishermen's bodies, we did attach it to a string and have a weight below it, but we didn't use any of that footage.

**Allan:** (Laughs) You were fishing with a camera!

**Véréna:** (Laughs).

**L:** Fishing with a camera. If we had caught a fish, we might have used it!

**Allan:** You attached the camera to a dead fish, did you not?

**V:** No. It's not true - it's one of us holding the camera.

**Lucien:** That's an error that's been said in the press.

**V:** There are many errors.

**Lucien:** it's an old wives' tale.

**Allan:** It's a great one... If you don't mind my asking - as someone who has some familiarity with psychedelics, it occurs to me, because the film is so immersive, that it would be an astonishingly good "trip" movie. And some of the filmmaking that *Leviathan* has been likened to—Brakhage, obviously—comes from a psychedelic perspective. Has anyone commented on that? Would you regard that as a sort of "misuse" of the film—a way of hijacking the purposes of the movie?

**Véréna:** It's very funny that you're asking this question, because this morning I was telling Lucien, "it's very strange that we always talked about doing this—suddenly being heavily drugged and watching the film, the whole thing."

**Lucien:** Even before we finished the film, we wanted to do it to see how it would feel.

**Véréna:** We wanted to edit under acid, and we never did it, unfortunately. But I'm sure it would be great. We received an email a couple of days ago, a friend of ours say, "I want to tell you, I went to see your film at the IFC in New York under acid, and I want to tell you how it was." Apparently, it was great.

**Allan:** The sound design seems like it would be a big part of that. But before we get to that, just quickly, what is the heavy metal music used in the film?

**Lucien:** The shot of the captain...

**Véréna:** Brian, listening to Mastodon.

**L:** A song called "I Am Ahab," from an album called *Leviathan*.

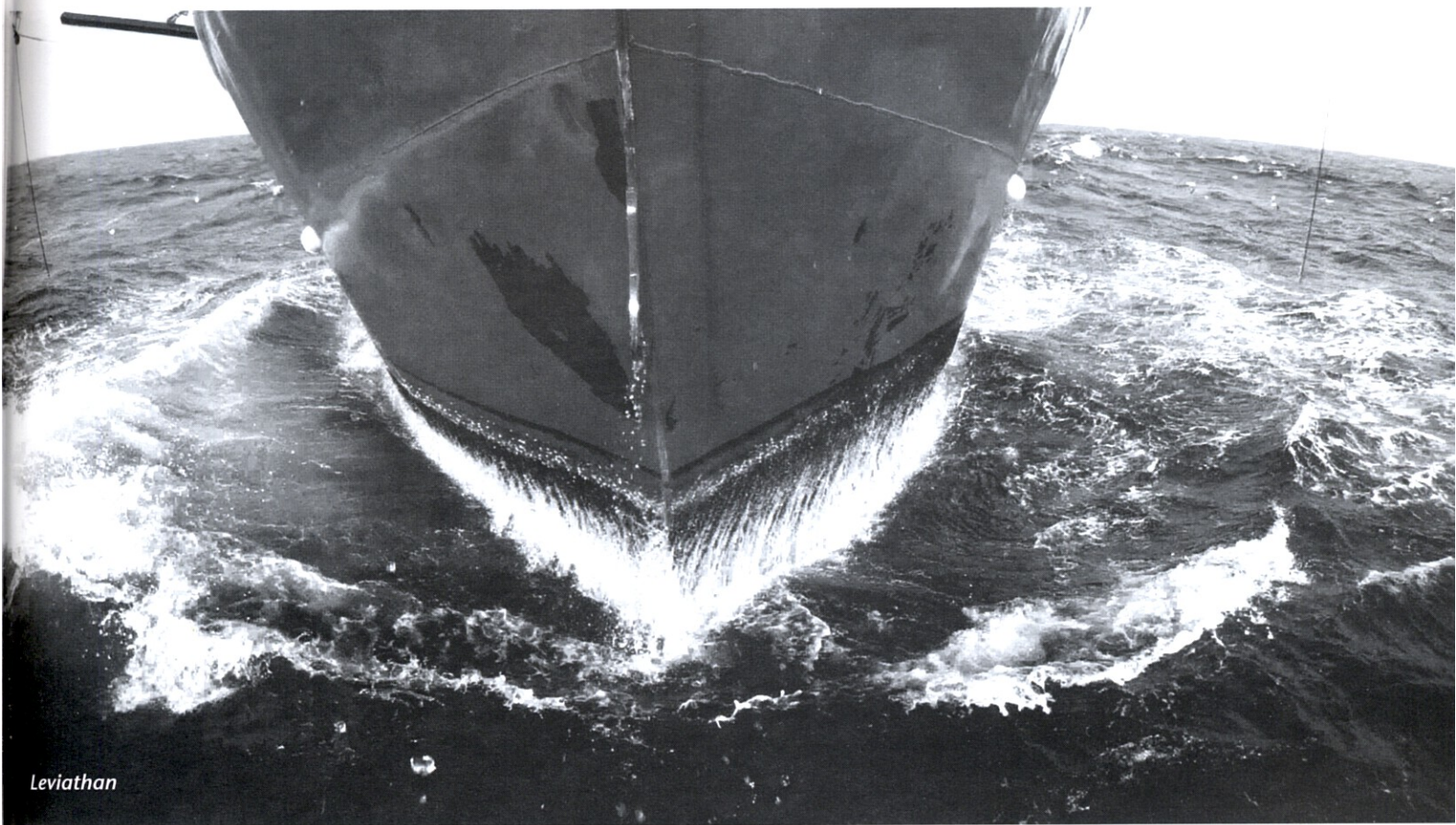
**Allan:** Oh, really? That couldn't have been an accident.

**L:** It was a very happy accident. It wasn't the only kind of music they listened to; they listened to country/western and other kinds of music, too.

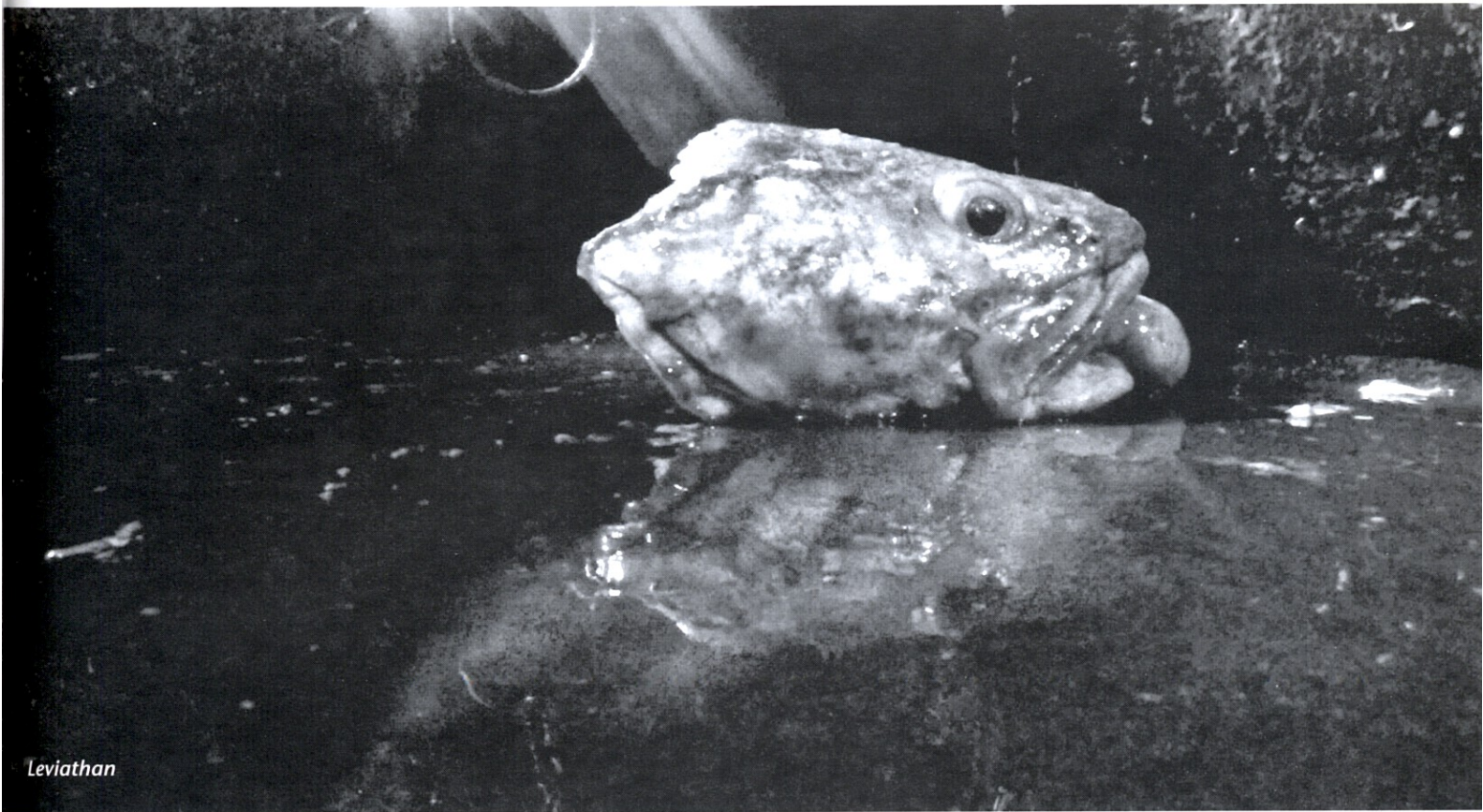
**Allan:** So did you supervise the sound design (by Ernst Karel and Jacob Ribicoff)? How did that work?

**Lucien:** I would say "supervise" is a bit too generous; I'm tone-deaf, and Véréna is a bit more musical, but not terribly. Ernst is a collaborator at the Sensory Ethnography Lab, we've collaborated on lots of different things together. He has the most amazing ear either of us have ever heard. His own aesthetic is very minimalist. He came up with the initial 5.1 surround from all the sounds that we gave him; we were just editing with video software that isn't that great for audio, and it had more of an unremittingly blaring, punk rock/ heavy metal kind of intensity. He modulated it a lot more and added a lot of really subtle overtones, that were almost inaudible in our mix, and then he gave the mix, once he was done with it, we went to New York





*Leviathan*



*Leviathan*



and worked with Jacob Ribicoff, who is a cinema sound mixer. Ernst comes more from the art world. The final mix is more cinematic as a result.

**Allan:** Did they add anything to the sound? Is all the sound we hear stuff that was recorded on the ship?

**Lucien:** All of it is stuff we recorded, and most of it is in fact synch [ie., synch sound, the audio recorded at the same time the images were shot]. Much of it, believe it or not, comes from these little Go Pro cameras—a mono-microphone that is really compromised. The sound is super-compressed and had lots of digital artifacts that we thought were really interesting. They sounded, simultaneously or by turns, bizarrely super-machinic, super-cyborgian, and then really organic, as if they themselves were gasping for air, as if they themselves were drowning. But we also recorded with a stereo recorder. We recorded, we're guessing, maybe 50 hours of wild sound, and they laid a lot more of that into amplify and to round out and to specialize and open up the final mix in ways we wouldn't have been able to do.

**Allan:** If I can ask, the one scene that seemed a slightly odd fit was the fisherman taking a shower, because it's so static and so, well, human. Where did that sequence come from...?

**Lucien:** Before I answer that, can I ask a question. Did you see it at the Vancouver Film Festival?

**Allan:** I did.

**Lucien:** We've remixed the sound radically since then. The shower scene is not different, but the four-to-five minute shot of the captain falling asleep in front of the television—he was watching television in the version you saw, but you probably couldn't hear what he was listening to. He's actually listening quite literally to *The Deadliest Catch*, which is this Discovery Channel reality TV show of Alaska king crab fishermen, which totally changes the feel of the scene, and the film as a whole. But how about the shower scene?

**Véréna:** It's at least one of the scenes we had long discussions about. There are two things: You use the words "human" and "static", and the shots with which we have been struggling with a lot are precisely the static shots and the two human shots. The shower scene ... one of the big questions between us when we were editing was how much of the human to use, and how, and when to use it ... their weight overall in the film. And suddenly somehow being trapped in the shower with this fisherman sounded like a very intimate moment—a moment where we are really close to him. They have so few moments where they can, first of all, wash; they do that once a week, maybe. So it's kind of a moment of respite. We don't have a lot of respite in the film. And the fact that they are cleaning themselves ... I don't know how to answer, but the intimacy at that moment felt, not necessary to us... but good, to us.

**Lucien:** Our typical struggle was how to introduce humans. We didn't want to have "character development" or any kind of obvious plot, in the way that one would expect from a fiction film; and we didn't want the film to be "about" fisherman themselves. We wanted to place the fishermen in this much larger ecological domain where they were rubbing shoulders with the boat, the machines, with nature, with the elements, and everything, so their centrality would be relativized to an extent. And even to start off in darkness at the beginning, on the back of the boat, and even though much of that is shot

from the head of a fisherman, it's very unfamiliar, it's very disconcerting, it's almost uncanny. You don't have your bearings; it doesn't feel like a quintessential human-centric film. And gradually humans are introduced, very slowly, to a very limited kind of degree, and the two shots—of the captain in front of the television and the equally static shot of the fisherman taking a shower—are the most intimate moments. To be sure, when he's taking the shower, it comes after the bow shot of the waves and the underwater sequence during the daytime with the seagulls; so there he is, in the hull, behind the bow, getting wet in order to clean himself. So there are lots of affinities and differences from the rest of the natural world, that are implicitly being thematized in that shot.

**Allan:** Lucien, you've said the film resembles a science fiction film or a horror film. How much of that was by design?

**Lucien:** To be honest, I may have said that, but Véréna has also said the same thing! Each of us repeats what the other has said.

**Véréna:** (Laughs).

**Lucien:** So you shouldn't place too much credence in that! Neither of us were thinking about science fiction films or horror films when we were making it. We just find ourselves obliged to sound more coherent about these sorts of genre distinctions after the fact. But we did have some references. They weren't deliberate, in terms of our intentionality, while we were making the film, but while we were editing the film, we were thinking more painters, more than about other filmmakers. We were thinking about Bosch and Breughel and Escher and Turner—the history of painting began to emerge, and the representation of nature and humanity's role in relation to nature began to emerge during post-production, during the editing. I don't know if it influenced us, but it's something we were aware of. But we only knew we didn't want this to be a canonical documentary.


**Véréna:** What we wanted to do, is just when we were watching the image, is to feel what we were living, the experience we had. And most of this experience was bloody and dark and strange. And even surreal, so I think this is why the reference to sci-fi and horror, because it was also nightmarish.

**Lucien:** It was simultaneously nightmarish and intimate. It wasn't an unadulterated nightmare. But to the extent that there are nightmarish qualities, it's a nightmare that's lived and breathed by the fisherman, as much as it is by their prey.

## Notes

- 1 *Workingman's Death* DVD commentary, Alive Media
- 2 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, Updated Edition (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009) 95
- 3 *Workingman's Death* DVD commentary, Alive Media
- 4 <http://theseventhart.info/tag/slaughterhouse-in-movies/>
- 5 Ronald Hayman, *Fassbinder Filmmaker* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1984) 78
- 6 *Workingman's Death* treats suffering labourers as well, but not so much in the Nigerian sequence, here the overall attitude of the employees is strangely ebullient, considering their chores. While other films to deal with animal slaughter hardly make the work seem enjoyable, none (or at least none of which this writer is aware) work so hard to humanize the workers and show compassion for them.
- 7 Comparable to the work of Stan Brakhage or to Werner Herzog's *Lessons In Darkness*, both frequently cited in writing on the film.
- 8 Rupert Murray's documentary adaptation of Charles Clover's book on the depletion of fish stocks worldwide due to industrial fishing. Though it is exactly the sort of documentary Castaing-Taylor and Paravel sought not to make, it is nonetheless a fine example of the form.





# Seasons of Pain and Change

TIFF'S 'A CENTURY OF CHINESE CINEMA'

*The Winter*

By ALICE SHIH

From June 5 to August 11, 2013, the Toronto International Film Festival Group presented "A Century of Chinese Cinema"—a comprehensive survey of more than 80 films from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, from the silent era to the present day. These golden classics not only provided a gateway for film lovers who wanted to appreciate Chinese films, they also chronicled the socio-political changes which have affected the lives of the inhabitants of all three regions. Historically, since the 1840s, China had been under constant threat of civil war and foreign invasion. The senseless violence of war juxtaposed with

courageous acts by ordinary individuals offered an endless supply of dramatic material for the indigenous film industry. In many of these films, history is revealed through a kaleidoscope of greed versus poverty, glory versus shame, war versus peace, love versus betrayal and characters caught up in the turmoil of pain and reluctant change.

From the festival's wealth of possibilities, I have selected three films for discussion which are representative of the three regional cinemas over three decades, from the nineteen forties to the sixties. The films are connected in that all have a season attached to their Chinese title—it was common for films to explore the radical changes and antagonistic reactions



metaphorically by ways of the changing of the season—and they are all realist melodrama, the most popular genre for the time period.

### Mainland China:

#### ***The Spring River Flows East Part 1 & 2 (1947)***

“May I ask how much sorrow you can carry?

It feels like the Yangtse River flowing east endlessly downstream in the spring!”

These two lines of lyrics open and are reprised throughout the epic film *The Spring River Flows East Part 1 & 2* / *Yi Jiang Chun Shui Xiang Dong Liu*, which played for more than three months in 1947 upon its release in theatres, breaking every box office record in post-WWII China. While spring usually represents a renewal of energy in a positive way, here it conveys a negative connotation, as the introductory lyrics indicate, that in springtime when the flow is strong, the river carries nothing but sorrow. Produced during the golden period of the Shanghai film industry, under the cordial collaborative direction of co-writers/directors team Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli, the film successfully captures the hardships and struggles of the Chinese during WWII from the Japanese invasion to the ensuing tumultuous depression that lasted for more than ten years.

*The Spring River Flows East* follows a couple who fall in love during the Japanese invasion of China. Zhongliang (meaning loyal and good, a satirical name for the character), portrayed by the actor Tao Jin, starts off as a hot-blooded idealistic teacher who motivates factory workers to fight against the Japanese, then goes on a journey to serve the troops, gets separated from his family and ends up becoming a despicable person. His wife Sufen/ Bai Yang, has to act as the head of the family in her husband's absence. She fights to survive war cruelty, endures extreme poverty, struggles to provide for their son from his infancy to boyhood all the while serving her elderly in-laws selflessly. Life is tough for both during the war in different ways, but events take a different turn after the war is over. After facing disappointments and setbacks, Zhongliang finds himself under the protection of a wealthy society woman in the decadent capital of Chongqing. Tormented by his low self-esteem and tempted by greed, he ends up using sex to get ahead, later denouncing his family to maintain his precarious social status. His wife takes another path. Barely surviving the war while losing loved ones, she is forced to live in poverty. She finds work as a maid while longing for the return of her beloved husband. Crushed after learning the truth about his heartlessness, she ends up losing her faith in life.

The film's storyline is classic melodrama but the realist approach to story-telling makes it heart-wrenching as the characters are well developed and the series of events leading up to the ultimate consequences are believable. Both directors were actors before, and the team meticulously directed the entire cast to deliver real conviction on screen. With a less skilled director, I believe it could easily have turned into caricature. Tao Jin gives Zhongliang such naivety that the audience is made to feel sorry for his downward spiral into moral bankruptcy. While viewers may be thus prompted to hope for the prodigal son to return to his family, one cannot expect a Hollywood kind of happy ending, given the leftist belief before the liberation. Unlike Zhongliang, a corruptible intellectual who didn't come from the proletariat, Sufen's storyline is portrayed more compassionately as the longing wife with a heart

of gold who possesses all the good virtues of the working class.

While this film was considered to be the Chinese counterpart of *Gone With the Wind*, the post-war Chinese film industry was financially challenged and the studios were operating on a tight budget. Shooting a war scene on location would be too expensive, so the directors creatively used newsreel footage alongside footage shot on studio sets, finding ways through montage sequences highly influenced by Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, to re-create credible visuals within their minimalist budget. To give one example, the crucial 'war violence' scene is a static shot of a crowd of about twenty people cramped together under a tree against a painted hazy backdrop. A Japanese soldier fires his machine gun in medium shot but no gunfire is shown, as the gun barrel's end is off screen. The audience only sees the barrel vibrating; it then cuts to the crowd fleeing (without any bloodshed), followed by a flock of birds bursting out from the tree. Another example, shows a dog attacking a Chinese woman through the use of a montage of close-ups. The fiercely barking Japanese dog is intercut with shots of a crying woman's terrified bloody face as she is brought down by the vicious animal. Implied violence is just as chilling as direct exposition of gory details, and this montage delivers an emotional impact as powerful as more explicit scenes.

Another aspect of interest in this film is that modernity and westernization are incorporated in the script to show the influx of foreign influences as well as changes at the time; in the end, however, the preservation of the Chinese identity is upheld by patriotic sentiments, and foreign influence downgraded. At the beginning of the film, the femme fatale Wang/Shu Xiwen, is presented as a Spanish dancer in costume, who is applauded while on stage, but made fun of backstage. Scenes of foreign glamour contrasted with backlash or hesitation are used throughout the film to reflect the conflicted reception in China of imported progressive ideas.

#### **Hong Kong: *In the Face of Demolition* (1953)**

Hong Kong, on the other hand, saw foreign rule very early on. This fishing port became a British colony in 1842 after the First Opium War, and in the 20th century underwent massive modernization, becoming the industrialized world class city it is today while still maintaining her own unique Chinese identity. In the early 1950s there was an influx of mainlanders, who fled south to avoid Communist rule after 1949. At the time, the economy in Hong Kong was weak and social services were inadequate to handle all the unemployed; the flourishing Cantonese film industry documented this social spectacle on screen in details.

*In the Face of Demolition* / *Wei Lou Chun Xiao* is a Hong Kong grassroots social dramedy with great chemistry amongst its outstanding ensemble cast of Cantonese cinema actors, including the multi-award winner Ng Cho-fan, Cheung Ying, Tsi Law-lin, and the future superstar Bruce Lee. The title in Chinese literally means “Spring Dawning in a Crumbling Building”; the season of spring is used again, but this time with a positive spin. Focusing on the tenants in a cramped unit of a crumbling building, director Li Tit successfully creates a micro-cosmic portrait of Hong Kong as a community which unites in hard times to turn things around. Like Cai and Zheng, Li had been an actor before he was given the chance to direct. He made around 100 films in his long career spanning over 50 years; he is more famous for his Cantonese opera films but *In the Face of Demolition* is considered to be one of his finest. Li



was a big fan of the Italian Neo-Realist film movement, an influence evident throughout the film.

The script, (although credited to Yu Gon-ji), was actually written by Lo Dun, one of the actors, and its producer Chan Wan. The duo use the vibrant and resilient spirit of the co-habitants to show how friends and neighbours could make a difference in hard times despite the presence of some malefactors.

The actors play diverse types of people in the society. Cheung Ying plays an intellectual who is a dreamer reluctant to adapt to change. Tsi Law-lin, also an intellectual, is more flexible, understanding that "bend is better than break". Ng Cho-fan plays a wise blue-collar taxi driver with a heart of gold who settles disputes and takes a leadership role. A loathsome couple played by Lo Dun and Lai Cheuk-cheuk are once-important people who cling to their past glory; looking down on everyone else, they jump at any opportunity to take advantage of the unfortunate. Lee Yuet-ching who plays the overbearing landlady, is herself being oppressed by the owner of the building. The most unfortunate of the lot is the family of a laid-off worker/Wong Chor-shan and his ill wife/Wong Man-lei who must rely on their young son /Bruce Lee to deliver newspapers to help paying for food and shelter. This family, representing the most under-privileged members of society, has to make the most concessions in life. The overall mix of characters depicts the life in post-war Hong Kong in a very realistic way.

This story deals with difficult humanitarian issues, where lives and innocence both are lost and morality is questioned. The crumbling building which needs to be demolished and redeveloped, as the title suggests, may be seen as a metaphor for Hong Kong, whose society was calling for reform; the film reflects the hope that the decent citizens of Hong Kong, like the film's virtuous neighbours, will prevail over the selfish and immoral ones. "Everybody for me, and I for everybody," is the motto adopted by the character played by Ng Chor-fan. This line became a popular saying and was on the lips of Hong Kong residents for more than a decade.

Foreign influences are evident throughout the film but unlike *The Spring River Flows East*, this time they are admired. In one scene, a teacher/Cheung Ying speaks with great enthusiasm of his wish to travel abroad, naming all the countries including Canada, the United States and England in heavily accented English. He is so excited by the prospect that he wakes everyone up in the middle of the night. The selfish villain/Lo Dun also speaks English, but for purposes of showing off his implied superiority in front of his landlady and neighbours. Another foreign concept is intimacy in public. In Chinese cinema until recent years, couples seldom expressed affection of any sort on screen, even though they might be alone in a scene. However, in this film, one of the characters played by Ng Cho-fan playfully tricks his wife/Yip Ping into giving him a kiss in front of others—an indication that, under the influence of British democracy and its ideological freedom, the public display of affection was no longer considered a taboo.

In fact, the success of this film reflects the spirit of the story itself. Like the previous film discussed, this one was produced on a shoe-string budget—its audience was definitely not drawn to the theatre for its production values. Apart from the opening shot of a rickshaw journeying through a narrow lane to arrive finally at the apartment building, the rest of the scenes are mostly located indoors with simple camera setups. By making judicious use of mise-en-scène, reversal editing and contrasting styles of naturalistic and excessive acting to build tension,

Director Li enhances a tightly woven script and touches the hearts of many.

### **Taiwan: The Winter (1969)**

Li Han-hsiang's *The Winter* focuses on poor inhabitants of Taipei who have had to begin again after relocating from the mainland to escape the Communists. Redevelopment and modernization of the region act as the backdrop for two people who love each other but are unable to express themselves due to social and personal barriers. Old Wu/Tien Yeh, is a shy hard-working middle-aged man who makes a living running a food stall. He is secretly in love with Jin/Kuei Ya-lei, a beautiful young woman living next door to him who has come from the countryside to help her Aunt. She too has feelings for him but keeps them secret. Old Wu considers himself to be too old and too poor to be a suitable husband for Jin who, heart-broken for the lack of response, leaves Taipei for her home town where she is married to someone else. Fate has it that her husband is killed in a car accident leaving her with a baby and no father/husband. Jin returns to the city, where she asks Old Wu to take care of her son while she works. The title of the film in Chinese means "Warm Winter", which better reflects the theme of the film—how love can bring warmth even in the bleakness of winter.

When this film was made, Taiwan was undergoing massive redevelopment, and residents struggled to cope with the changes that accompanied it. Like the foreign ideas in *The Spring River Flows East*, new technologies are presented here as sometimes more a headache than a benefit. For example, in the scene when Jin tells Old Wu that her husband has been killed in a motor accident, cars can be seen madly speeding on the street right behind her. Third Uncle's old truck keeps breaking down. Little Brother, doing science experiments at home, ends up blowing fuses. All the new technologies entail risks. When the neighbourhood redevelopment team, apparently oblivious to any responsibility to either give Old Wu prior notice or to relocate him, uncaringly tears down Old Wu's make-shift food stall, his home and workplace are crushed. His neighbour can only comfort him by saying "Out with the old will bring in the new", and encourages him to register for a new stall and a new start. Eventually, Old Wu does get a new spot, but it's a lot smaller and in a worse location.

The pressure of daily living lies heavily on everyone's shoulders. In fact, it may be said that it's the harsh living conditions and related social issues that form the 'antagonists' in this film, rather than stereotypical "evil" characters as in *The Spring River Flows East* and *In the Face of Demolition*. This is rarely seen in Chinese melodramas which are usually heavy-handed, with simplistic black and white characters and issues. In *The Winter*, the characters are more three-dimensional, with individual strengths and weaknesses as in the European cinema. Positive visuals are seen throughout the film to counteract the melancholy, which contributes to the message of "healthy realism" films—the name given to an entire genre of Taiwanese films that portrays Taiwanese living happily despite hardships. These films acted as 'soft propaganda' to spread a positive message that "prosperity will come after the work is done". Although poor, the film's characters always enjoyed fresh produce and seafood, as Taiwan is an island suited for agriculture and fisheries. Winter might be cold, but there is always a smoking stove to warm the body, and a steaming bowl to warm the stomach. Life may be tough, but love, kindness and family help everyone endure and prevail at the end. The philosophy of *In the Face of*



*Demolition* ("Everybody for me, and I for everybody,") is very similar to *The Winter's* "Fishes help the water, and the water helps the fishes."

Li Han-hsiang loved to use tracking shots and precisely calculated blockings in his glamorous costume dramas, but he also applied these visual aesthetics to present the modest neighbourhood depicted in this film. Apart from the opening scene which follows a truck taking Jin to Taipei, most of the scenes were shot in a studio with a constructed set. Walls were all removable to accommodate camera and track movements to allow the exploring camera to penetrate into the heart of the action within the cramped space, and this choice of shooting was very difficult before the invention of the steadicam. Through this investigative camera work, we get to see highly choreographed scenes unveil as if they were candid camera shots documenting events as they unfold to achieve a realistic look. However, the overuse of music in this film is jarring at times, counteracting the realistic approach of the visuals.

Like the other directors mentioned earlier, Li Han-hsiang was also an actor before he directed, and he really knew his craft of bringing out best performances. Kuei Ya-lei's rendition of Jin lets the audience into the mind of an unlucky but optimistic young woman who is intelligent and compassionate. Tien Yeh successfully portrays an introverted caring man struggling both internally with his emotion for Jin and externally with his challenging livelihood. Together, they create an unlikely couple whose love for each other could go either way: stay hidden or be expressed.

All three films discussed depict characters challenged by

hard times who have to adapt to survive. They are all realist films with character development achieved through the characters' recognition of their own strengths, weaknesses and determination for change. Another way to compare the films is to take a single obstacle evident in all three—a rain storm that the characters have to endure—and to look at the different contexts and approaches, each aiming for a different effect on the audience. In *The Spring River Flows East*, the storm at the end of part 1 acts as an antagonist testing the spirit of the characters in order for them to rise above it and thus and come out more resilient. This is the approach of classic Chinese cinema where storms are usually used metaphorically to evoke this sentiment. The use of the storm in *In the Face of Demolition* is similar though a bit more advanced, where it also acts as a catalyst to unite the characters challenged by their circumstances and to separate them from the bad ones. This signifies metaphorically that a deep cleansing is needed, despite temporary pain, in order for positive social reform. *The Winter* has the most innovative use of a storm; it is seen as a nuisance only and not really a threat, the message being that love can turn a negative into a positive—an opportunity for bonding and fun, converting misery into joy.

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*The Winter*





# Le Festival International de Films de Fribourg

APRIL 16 – 23, 2013

By ALISON FRANK

The Swiss city of Fribourg isn't the most happening place: it seems fair to call it sleepy, when their film festival's 'midnight screenings' begin at 10 pm and finish before 12. In a metropolis like Paris or London, films can get lost among all the other cultural events on offer, but festivals that take place in smaller cities get to be the centre of attention. And when a festival has a programme as exciting as Fribourg's, audiences will be glad that there's nothing to distract them.

This year, the Festival International de Films de Fribourg (FIFF) had a record 36,000 spectators—not bad for a city that's home to just 39,000 people. In a speech at the closing ceremony, artistic director Thierry Jobin shared his ambitions for next year's edition, aiming for audience figures to match the city's population.

The FIFF began, 27 years ago, as a festival of Asian, African and South American cinema. These three continents continue to be the focus of the festival's competition and short film selections, but as of last year new parallel sections were introduced, to allow the festival to include films from all over the world. 'Diaspora' brings together a set of films that a given country's diaspora watch as a way of keeping in touch with their roots. Atom Egoyan curated this year's Armenia-themed programme, which included highlights such as Sergei Parajanov's 1968 homage to Armenian culture, *The Colour of Pomegranates* (*Sayat Nova*, 1968), Robert Guédiguian's *Armenia* (*Le Voyage en Arménie*, 2005) as well as two of Egoyan's own films, *Calendar* (1993) and *Ararat* (2002). Egoyan's work on a Canadian Opera Company production of *Salome* prevented him from attending the festival, but *Ararat* star Charles Aznavour was present to take part in a debate following the film's screening.

Another new section introduced last year was 'Terra Incognita', which aims to introduce audiences to lesser-known national cinemas: countries whose film production, despite being very strong, has been largely overlooked by festivals. In 2013, FIFF turned its spotlight on Uzbekistan. Since 2004, government funding has helped to boost the country's production levels, currently at 70 films per year. FIFF's programme of 8 Uzbek features revealed a distinctive national cinema that blends serious aesthetic concerns and social commentary with popular humour and romance. In Yolkin Tuychev's *Postscriptum*, the troubled relationship of two brothers underlines the gulf between modern urban and traditional rural life. Similarly, Ayub

Shahabiddinov's *The Yurt* (*O'tov*) centres on a father who tries vainly to protect his only son from the outside world beyond the steppe. In both, Nazim Tulyakhodzhayev plays the brooding, big-hearted recluse, with a presence and pathos to rival any Bollywood star.

The festival's 'Homage' section offered further discoveries: designed to recognise those who bring a broader range of cinema to world audiences, this year's selection showcased the work of the World Cinema Foundation, founded by Martin Scorsese. Since 2007, the foundation has restored more than 20 neglected classics of world cinema, of which FIFF selected 4: *Imagination* (*Kalpana*, dir. Uday Shankar, India, 1948), *After the Curfew* (*Lewat djam malam*, dir. Usmar Ismail, Indonesia, 1953), *The Housemaid* (*Hanyo*, dir. Kim Ki-young, South Korea, 1960) and *Downpour* (*Ragbar*, dir. Bahram Beyzai, Iran, 1972). *The Housemaid* was also part of the 'Carte Blanche' section, which gives the artistic director of another Swiss film festival the chance to programme any films they choose. Anaïs Emery of the Neuchâtel International Fantastic Film Festival paired the 1960 original feature with Im Sang-soo's 2010 remake of the same title: both films are, as she describes them, 'psycho-sexual thriller[s]' which reflect on social class in South Korea, but with different villains and victims in each film. The 'Carte Blanche' programme was rounded out by *The Taste of Money* (*Do-nui mat*), Im Sang-soo's most recent film, again centred on a rich family of questionable morals. The director was present in Fribourg to give a masterclass in which he discussed his career, major influences, and cinema's relationship to Korean society.

The biggest buzz at the festival was reserved for a rare bird: a star in the world of both sport and art. As part of the FIFF's 'Genre' programme, this year devoted to sport-themed films, soccer player turned actor-producer Eric Cantona was in attendance to present *Les Rebelles du foot*, a documentary about soccer players who have used their celebrity to make a difference in their home countries. He also presented two episodes from the series *Looking for*, examining the relationship of the cities of Istanbul and Buenos Aires to their soccer culture. But the programme of sports cinema wasn't dominated by soccer: in the 17-strong line-up, there were films about people trying out sports that aren't traditionally played in their country (Indians hitting the hockey rink in *One More* and Sri Lankans playing handball in *Machan*), different nationalities and genders coming together to form teams (in *As One* North and South Koreans







join forces for table tennis, while in *The Iron Ladies* [Satree lek], male volleyball players who are gay finally find a home on a mixed-gender team) and comedies about team misfits (the hockey team's thug in Canadian feature *Goon*, and the obsessive-compulsive team captain in *Curling King* [Kong Curling] from Sweden). The programme also gave Swiss audiences their first opportunity to see Hollywood baseball flick *Moneyball* (2011), as well as boasting the festival's only 3D movie, *Storm Surfers* (2012).

Fribourg's parallel programmes were so diverse and intriguing, they rivalled what is normally the centrepiece of any film festival: the competition. The FIFF's one competitive section was just as strong as its parallel selections, although it was disappointing that there was not a single African film among its 12 features, given the festival's historic vocation to showcase the cinema of Africa, Asia and South America. This year, the Middle East seemed to have replaced Africa, with Rama Burshtein's *Fill the Void* (Lemale et ha'hala), Mahoud Ghaffari's *It's a Dream* (In yek royast) and Haifaa Al-Mansour's *Wadja*. Artistic director Thierry Jobin explained that the first film he chose for the competition, *Three Sisters* (San zimei, dir. Wang Bing), set the bar very high this year, so he says that he was unable to find any African films strong enough to compete. Yet two films that were considered sufficiently strong for the competition, *Your Time is Up* (Nu-guna je myeonge jukkoshipda, dir. Kim Sung-hyun) and *In the Name of Love* (Lay chong nguoi ta, dir. Luu Huynh), were replete with such implausible and meaningless violence that they became almost laughable. If the FIFF couldn't find an African film better than either of these, I suspect that they were not looking hard enough. For contrast, consider this year's Göteborg Film Festival, which screened a total of 8 films from sub-Saharan Africa, plus 4 films from the Maghreb region, all made between 2012 and 2013. Given the strong francophone presence in Africa, it is surprising that a Swiss festival couldn't find more than one African film at least strong enough for its parallel sections, if not the competition. The continent's sole representative among 113 films at the FIFF was *Quartier Mozart* (1992), breakthrough feature of Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bekolo, who had been scheduled to take part in the international jury but was unable to attend.

As for *Three Sisters*, the film which, for Jobin, disqualified the entirety of Africa's cinematic production over the past year, most of the FIFF juries were appropriately impressed, awarding the film 5 of the festival's 8 prizes, including grand prix, 'Le Regard d'or'. For this reviewer, *Three Sisters* was overrated: the only documentary in competition, it took a purely observational approach to the lives of three little girls, left largely to fend for themselves in their farming village in China. From a humanitarian perspective, it is an important film because it presents a compelling contrast: children whose behaviour is utterly familiar, but whose living conditions are unfathomably poor. Like kids all over the world, the three sisters are at once deliberate and clumsy in their movements, fixated on small details, loving and occasionally grumpy with each other. But these normal kids are also covered with fleas, sleep all together in a wet bed, and have pig herding to compete with their homework. 'If Emile Zola were a filmmaker today, he would be called Wang Bing', Jobin declares in the programme guide. But he forgets that Zola's novels, while reflecting poverty, were also rigorously constructed works of art designed to engage and entertain their audiences—a far cry from my experience of watching *Three Sisters*, 153 excruciating minutes of herding animals, gathering

dung, washing hands, cooking noodles and drying shoes. I had a good idea of the sisters' lives from the first dim long-take of their mud-floored hut: already I wanted to reach through the screen and whisk them away to a clean, warm and dry home in the city. It is possible to judge documentaries by different standards than fiction features: some may consider it enough for a documentary film to present an important issue, even if it doesn't pay much attention to aesthetics or narrative form. The international jury praised Wang Bing for not telling audiences what to think about the world he showed. For me, it was not enough that the director simply recorded people living in poverty, with no further input than on-screen text to identify friends and family members. The director's role in editing bare reality into a meaningful piece of cinema might have been more evident in the 89-minute version of this film (the shorter version is entitled *Alone* [Gudu, 2013]).

The international jury singled out two other films for its remaining prizes: *It's a Dream* took the Talent Tape Award and the Special Jury Prize went to *The Wild Ones* (Los salvajes). The latter, by Argentinian director Alejandro Fadel, is an impressive debut feature that follows a group of teenagers, starting with their escape from a youth detention centre and continuing to the end of their ill-fated journey into the wild. Fadel creates an intimate, almost mystical atmosphere in his portrayal of the young people, their relationship to each other and to the flora and fauna surrounding them. The timing and narrative development are poorly judged towards the end, though, making film's final 20 to 30 minutes feel interminable.

*It's a Dream* is a far more suspenseful film, introducing viewers to the world of Roya, a young Iranian woman living a closely monitored life in a student dorm. She gets involved in a pyramid scheme to pay off her debts, but one of her creditors catches up with her and forces her to repay him in a manner that will have grave consequences for them both. *It's a Dream* shares its atmosphere of oppression with Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* and *About Elly*: in a country with strict morality laws, subterfuge becomes a necessity of life, but this same secrecy can make small problems escalate, with devastating effect. *It's a Dream* unfortunately falls far short of Farhadi's sophisticated characterisation and skilful narrative development. A clearer exposition of Roya's circumstances would allow the audience to relate to her more quickly and easily. Her creditor, meanwhile, makes an implausible switch from determination to exploit a vulnerable young woman, to deeply-felt concern for her welfare as a human being.

The FIPRESCI jury gave its prize to Japanese thriller *Penance* (Shokuzai), a 4 ½ hour film originally commissioned as a TV series from seasoned horror director Kiyoshi Kurosawa. It begins with the murder of Emili, the new girl at school: four of her classmates witness her being led away by a stranger but, suffering from shock, they are unable to remember anything about him. Emili's mother tells the girls that they must either find the murderer, or perform some kind of penance. She visits them in turn, 15 years later, to see what form their penance has taken. Now grown up, each of the girls continues to feel the effects of her friend's murder in different ways: as the director presents the bizarre worlds they live in, the deliciously suspenseful and creepy atmosphere, Hitchcockian in flavour, owes much to Kurosawa's background in genre cinema. Skilful use of lighting and minimalist sets is also key to this atmosphere, creating an unreal, artificially pristine space that acts as a devastating backdrop to the characters' interior chaos.





The last of the prizewinners, bagging the festival's audience award, was *Wadja*, the first Saudi Arabian film by a female director. As the country's women have just now gained the right to ride bicycles, this story of a little girl's determination to obtain one of her own is all the more relevant. Special mentions went to Pelin Esmer's *Watchtower* (*Gozetleme kulesi*), another feature about a female struggle against a conservative society. Among the most cinematographically accomplished films in the competition, *Watchtower* also boasts what must be one of cinema's most dynamic childbirth scenes, and presents a rare and sympathetic portrait of a woman who feels alienated from her baby.

There were four films in competition which didn't receive any awards or special mentions, but nonetheless deserve mention here. Heartwarming Philippine comedy *Bwakaw* (dir. Jun Robles Lana) tells the story of an elderly, closeted misanthrope who is finally prompted to seize the day when his dog Bwakaw becomes ill. *The Cleaner* (*El Limpiador*, dir. Adrián Saba) is a debut feature with an accomplished aesthetic, conveying an eerie yet lyrical atmosphere of abandonment in a La Paz terrorised by a mysterious virus. *Fill the Void* also develops a unique atmosphere, this time a gilded, soft-focus one, with its glimpse into the world of ultra-Orthodox Jews. Finally, *Sleepless Night* (*Jam mot deuneun bam*, dir. Jang Kun-jae) offers an original series of dialogues revolving around a young married couple

who wonder whether they are ready for the challenge of raising children—very much a topical issue in South Korea, which has one of the lowest birthrates in the world..

Clearly, this year's FIFF presented a vast and appealing range of films, from light comedy to serious documentary, from restored black-and-white features to the latest 3D movies. It screened films from cinematic heavyweights like South Korea and Japan as well as the lesser-known cinemas of Uzbekistan and Armenia. The festival brought together stars of the film world like Im Sang-soo and stars of the sporting world like Eric Cantona. Among the very strongest of the smaller festivals I have attended, FIFF would have had something for everyone, if it hadn't neglected one of its founding continents. The selection committee for FIFF 2014 should avoid picking a favourite early on and using it as a benchmark against which to measure all other films. Even if this year's prize selection was rather uniform, next year's competition doesn't have to be. Given that this year's festival left out Africa almost entirely, FIFF audiences would surely welcome a renewed focus on African cinema in 2014.

Alison Frank was on the FIPRESCI jury at the 2013 edition of the Festival International de Films de Fribourg. You can follow her on Twitter @alisonfrank.



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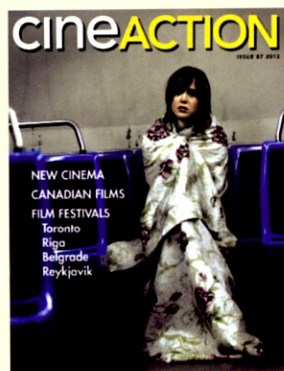
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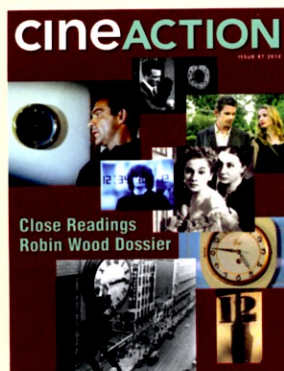
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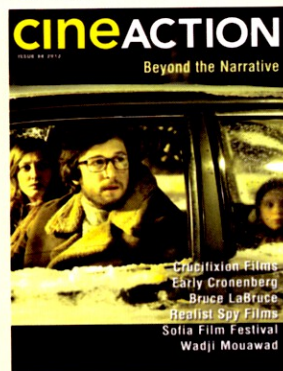
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